

My
Friend's
Little
Sister

vol. 5

Has It
IN
for
Me!

Author:
mikawaghost

Illustration:
tomari





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Characters



Ooboshi Akiteru

The protagonist. Second year. He is determined to dedicate his teenage years to absolute efficiency, and Ozuma is his only friend. He calls himself an average high schooler, but is actually the director of the 05th Floor Alliance. Recently, he's concluded that cute and annoying might not be such a bad mix after all. He's not a big fan of ghosts, so summer isn't his favorite season.



Kohinata Iroha

First year. Ozuma's younger sister. At school, she's known for being a cheerful, kind, and perfectly-behaved honor student, but in reality she's an overly hyper and annoying girl who likes to pester Akiteru (and only him) persistently. She's a talented actress who can perform a whole range of voices. Her outgoing personality means she gets hyped up when summer rolls around.



Tsukinomori Mashiro

Second year. Akiteru's classmate, cousin, and fake girlfriend. She treats him coldly in real life but is all over him on LIME. Her secret identity is the hit author, Makigai Namako. Weak to the summer heat, she spends most of it holed up at home, but she does enjoy the events that the season brings.



Kohinata Ozuma

Second year. Nicknamed Ozu. Handsome, and Akiteru's only friend. Ozuma holds absolute trust in him. Unlike his sister, he's kind and considerate. A genius programmer, he manages the 05th Floor Alliance's systems all by himself. He worries about his computers overheating in the summer.



Kageishi Sumire

A twenty-five-year-old who loves alcohol. Akiteru's homeroom teacher, who is feared as the "Venomous Queen." In truth, she's Murasaki Shikibu-sensei, a skilled artist who can't keep to a deadline. To her, there's nothing like the bliss of downing a beer after a summer doujinshi convention.

Recap

Relationships are unnecessary. Friends are unnecessary; well, more than one, anyway. And girlfriends are *definitely* unnecessary. The way most people spend their youths is horribly inefficient, and I decided long ago to shed everything unnecessary in order to get ahead in life. Despite all that, there I was—Ooboshi Akiteru, epitome of efficiency—with this girl who kept sneaking into my apartment.

Kohinata Iroha. She wasn't my sister, she wasn't my friend, and she definitely wasn't my girlfriend. She was nothing more than my friend's little sister. She was as annoying as she wanted to be in any given situation, and I had always thought she turned it up to eleven with me because she was never interested in having me see her as an object of romantic affections.

That's right: past perfect tense. I *had* always thought.

But then, during the summer vacation, we happened to get wrapped up in this "Ceremony of Knots" thing in Kageishi Sumire's home village deep in the mountains, and since then Iroha and I have gotten closer.

Then, we were invited to a private beachside villa by its owner Kiraboshi Kanaria: the editor for Makigai Namako, the 05th Floor Alliance's scenario writer and best-selling light novel author. As the group's director, I really look up to Canary. At her villa, she taught me about the importance of facing my own desires, and how to use that to bring out the talent of my creatives. Only then was I able to objectively face my own feelings.

That was how I noticed it. Embarrassingly, annoyingly, and regrettably enough, when I spent time with Iroha, I always felt this...cuteness from her, even while she was being a total pest. That didn't mean I had romantic feelings for her, of course. I'd never had any experience of romance either, so I didn't even know what it felt like. The only thing I was sure of was that Kohinata Iroha—my friend's little sister who had it in for me—was a cute girl. And that included the annoying part of her personality.

From that realization and the emotions surrounding it, I came up with my next thought.

Was it okay for me to be the only one who realized how great her unique mix of cute and annoying was?

Having society as a whole recognize your talents and charms was

the best way to make your life more efficient. So I listened to my heart and promised myself to find Iroha a friend who she could pester as much as she wanted. Iroha was in the grade below the rest of the Alliance, so once we graduated, there would be nobody she could be herself around. There was no doubt that it'd be better for her to have someone there with whom she could have fun and be totally open.

By the way, maybe this was just me, but I felt like Mashiro was acting weird lately. Not that I saw any reason for her to act weird.

Interlude: Mashiro's Gloom

"Iroha-chan, are you the Alliance's voice actor?"

It was late at night. I was still staring at the message I'd typed into LIME a few minutes ago under the soft light from my bedside table. My fingers only needed to move a couple millimeters to send the message, but they were frozen.

A few days had passed since that day on the beach. Ever since Aki dropped his phone in Sumire-sensei's car on the way home and I accidentally saw the screen, my mind had been a whirlwind of emotions.

When I had gathered all the courage I had to confess to Aki and he told me he didn't want to think about romance until he'd met the Alliance's goals, I thought he was a big, stupid, idiot dumbface who should go die in a fire for making me wait. I was still able to stay positive after that, though, because I had a hidden card up my sleeve: I was Makigai Namako, and that meant I could keep moving forward together with the Alliance. Even when there were other cute girls—like Iroha-chan and Midori-san—around him, I could easily reassure myself by remembering I held a unique place in his heart when they didn't.

But I was wrong.

Iroha-chan was the Alliance's voice actor. She was the mysterious "Phantom Voice Troupe" who lent their voices to *Koyagi: When They Cry*—the invisible member of the group, who not even Murasaki Shikibu-sensei, OZ, or I were told the identity of. That meant there was a good chance she was the most special member to Aki.

If that was who Iroha-chan was, then the bonds she would have formed with Aki through their work together was something that I, as his favorite author and nothing else, couldn't compete with. Especially since, as far as he knew, I was a male college student.

Iroha-chan wasn't just any girl either. She was my first ever friend.

She got mad on my behalf when I was too weak and pitiful to trust anybody or even treat them nicely, and then she reached out her hand to me and asked to be friends.

Maybe I was being punished. Punished for trying to get closer to Aki by deceiving him. If only I'd been brave and used my own voice, my own face, to speak with him. Instead I chose to keep a careful

distance, worried he'd reject me if he found out who I was, and scared that I'd hurt him. I was worried I'd never recover if that happened. That was why Iroha-chan was happy to be my friend without realizing I was her rival in love.

If I had been upfront about everything right from the start, Iroha-chan might not have even tried to make friends with me. Everything I did was fraught with indecisiveness. I couldn't commit properly to anything. And in the end, I'd be left with nothing.

"I haven't changed one bit since I was a kid..."

I looked at the calendar. August was coming to an end. That meant this region's famous summer festival would be happening soon. Back when I was a kid, my brother and I would hang out with the Ooboshis—Aki's family and our cousins—every year, and part of that was going to the festival together.

It was a huge event that attracted visitors even from outside the prefecture. The most famous was its fireworks display, arranged by a store that had been in business since the Edo period. Several large companies even backed the event.

Aki hated it. He said it was a waste of time because, as kids, the only thing we got to see there were the backs of the endless swarms of tall adults surrounding us.

But he still came and did his best to enjoy it. Because he was Aki.

"If we get up this tree, we'll be able to see how pretty they really are."

Back then, Aki had found us some secret "reserved seating," so we could enjoy the fireworks to the fullest despite our size. When I looked up, I saw him and my brother chatting excitedly as they climbed. Meanwhile, I stayed at the bottom and looked back down at the tree's roots.

I hadn't had the physical ability to climb a tree. I was not getting up there. It wasn't like I even wanted to watch the fireworks anyway. I started sulking and ignored the hand Aki stretched out towards me. I ended up sitting at the base of the tree and blocking out the outside.

I was weak. A coward. A loser.

I hated crowds and I didn't like going outside; I only plucked up the courage to do it because it meant I could spend time with Aki. It would have taken only a single step more to have a real blast with him. I hated myself so much it was almost comical. My inefficiency, my indecisiveness...

And what did Aki do?

He came down from the tree to sit next to me.

"What are you doing? You can leave me; it's my fault for not being able to climb."

I'd tried to push him away. But I still remember Aki's reply clearly.

“I’m the one who picked this place without thinking about your capabilities. It’s my fault. It’s only right for me to watch the fireworks from the same spot as you.”

Aki was the same, then and now. He came down to meet me when I felt alone and confused. He could have reached incredible heights if he’d just left me, but Aki was kind. I’ve always loved him. I couldn’t imagine a day when I wouldn’t, no matter how far I looked into the future.

I loved Aki no matter how Iroha-chan felt. I loved him even if her talents granted her a special, secret place in the Alliance. My feelings wouldn’t change; they *couldn’t* change.

“It doesn’t matter if I know it’s her or not, dummy.”

I erased the message I’d typed out. I didn’t want to stick my nose into Iroha-chan’s business like this. It wasn’t important. If Iroha-chan became my enemy, and she won Aki’s heart instead of me, I’d lose both my only friend and the boy I loved...

No, that wasn’t right.

Even if we both loved the same guy and became rivals, I knew Iroha-chan wouldn’t hate me or reject me. If I was scared that she might, that was my problem. It was because I didn’t believe in myself. It was because I didn’t think I was good enough to be Iroha-chan’s friend. I didn’t think I was good enough to stand shoulder to shoulder with Aki either.

That was why even the most insignificant secrets and conflicts of interest got me so anxious.

I need to be stronger.

Strong enough not to get hurt, no matter what the truth was. Strong enough to face Iroha-chan without getting timid about it.

“Huh?”

My phone vibrated then, as though it were reading my mind. I checked the sender.

“Dad?”

That was odd. I knew dad doted on me, but he was the CEO of a large company, so he was too busy to send me LIME messages very often. I checked the message—and my blood ran cold.

Dad: Mashiro. Your fake relationship with Akiteru-kun isn’t going well, is it?

The timing was so perfect, a chill ran down my spine.

Prologue

It happened on a day when the end of summer vacation was in sight.

Those students who had failed to plan ahead were starting to panic about the lack of progress on their homework. They would now be rushing to finish it in the following days and nights, to no avail. As for me, of course I had implemented my super efficient plan for Getting It Done, so it was business as usual.

It was just going to be another normal day with no surprises.

“What to do, what to do... I’m so busy...”

“You’re not. Or you wouldn’t be here.”

My kouhai was here in the bedroom of Apartment 502 (which I was renting) and getting on my nerves as usual.

“Look, you’re only sixteen and you’re a lonely, uptight producer, so you might not know this, but the happy people around you are packing their summer vacations full of plans.”

“You were here almost every day. When you weren’t, it was because we were on that trip.”

“Details, details. No need to be rude, Senpai.”

The girl puffing up her cheeks and pouting at me while kicking her bare feet through the air was Kohinata Iroha. She was sitting and relaxing on my bed and no, I don’t know where her socks had gone. Her outfit looked breathable enough to keep her arms, chest, legs, and the rest of her cool.

If someone from school saw her hanging out in my room like this, they might get the wrong idea, but Iroha wasn’t my girlfriend. She wasn’t my little sister or my childhood friend either. Nothing so simple.

She was the little sister of my friend who lived next door. A kouhai with a tenuous link to me.

Iroha’s hair was bright and golden. Her eyes, which darted restlessly around the room, were big, and so was her well-developed chest. She had a well-proportioned figure too. Appearance-wise, she probably ticked all the boxes for a lot of guys, especially considering her popularity at school, where she was a cheerful and polite honor student. Apparently she got a lot of attention there.

Apparently.

When she was with me, she was a totally different beast.

“Look, if you *really* want me to make room in my suuuper packed recording schedule for you, you gotta be honest with me! A hundred percent honest!”

I wish my suitcase was super packed, so I could take a one-way trip to the moon and leave her behind. Fly me to the moon indeed.

“Honest how?”

“Hmm... Well, if you said ‘Man, I really wanna spend time with Iroha-chan’ three times and then barked once, I guess I could accommodate you.”

“ManIreallywannaspendtimewithIrohachan,
manIreallywannaspendtimewithIrohachan,
manIreallywannaspendtimewithIrohachan, woof.”

“Once more with feeling!”

“No. I did what you said already.”

She never said I had to emote.

“You’re just embarrassed! You just need to listen to your heart and the words will come.”

“Makes sense.”

I had heard that suppressing your true feelings was something that drew you far away from happiness. Thinking too hard was a roadblock in the pursuit of happiness. Selfishness was a virtue. That sounded like something someone might write in a book or something.

“I’ll go ahead and tell Otoi-san what *your* heart’s saying then.” I unlocked my phone and opened up LIME. “Iroha’s complaining that her schedule’s too busy.”

“Aaah! I’m sorry! I’m sorry! I got carried away! Please forgive me!” Iroha wailed and threw herself at me.

Otoi-san was always my trump card for this very reason. Her name alone was the ultimate deterrent.

“If you just told me your schedule from the start, we wouldn’t have this problem.”

“Hmph. Why not let me indulge my feminine whims for once? I just thought it’d be cute to see you panic.”

“Because this is about work and it’s serious. Now gimme a date.”

“Hmm... To be honest, I’ve got nothing on, so whenever’s fine.”

“Wasn’t your summer vacation supposed to be ‘packed full of plans,’ or are you not one of these happy people you were telling me about?”

“When you get to be as popular as me, you get a free pass to refuse any invitations you want. People just shrug and think it’s because you’re too busy.”

“Must be nice to be so popular then,” I grumbled, but I wasn’t actually jealous.

Maybe if she were an ordinary “friend’s little sister,” I could make

like a romantic-comedy protagonist and let that comment slide, but unfortunately I knew her well enough to know those rejections weren't down to her being dense. Especially after that firm decision I'd made over the summer.

"Hey, Iroha—"

"Wait, I have a LIME message." Iroha pulled out her phone, and I could no longer quiz her about the possibility of making friends—and particularly one best friend—in her own grade.

Her phone didn't have any manga, music, or YTube on it. It was purely for calls and LIME messages. This phone was from her parents, and it was separate from the one I gave her with all those entertainment apps on it. It was an outdated device, but her fingers moved across it as smoothly as any other modern high school girl.

"You barely message anyone. Is it from Ozu?"

"Oh, nope. He doesn't message me much."

"So it's from Sumire-sensei?"

"She turned her LIME notifications off. Said there was a ton of anime and games she wanted to catch up on from when she was trapped in drawing hell."

"Mashiro, then?"

"She's been messaging me a bit lately. But you're still wrong!"

"Huh. Then who?"

"Well... Hm? Pfft... Hah... Pffffffffft!"

"The hell are you laughing about?"

Iroha had torn her gaze from her phone and was now grinning at me in that way she did whenever she was about to piss me off.

"Senpai, don't tell me you're jealous, and that's why you're so uber curious about who's messaging me?"

"Huh?! Of course I'm not jealous! What's there to be jealous of?!"

"So basically it doesn't matter who I'm talking to, right? *Right?* There's no need to blush, 'cause I know the only reason you'd care is because you're jealous!" Iroha's finger jabbed into my cheek sixteen times as she rattled off word after word like a machine gun.

She's so annoying. Like, way too annoying!

"I just thought it was unusual for you to message anybody. I didn't realize you had friends who weren't Mashiro or in the Alliance."

"Why you! I have like a hundred friends! I'm like the most popular in my grade! See my smug smile?!"

"Yeah, I see it. You don't have to point it out," I said, suppressing the urge to punch her in the face.

While I had come to terms with her annoying attitude being part of her overall cuteness, annoying was definitely still a keyword in that equation.

"I know how popular you are, I just didn't know you had any

friends close enough to message over LIME.”

I’d known Iroha for a long time, but I guess I still didn’t know *everything* about her. I’d planned to find her a best friend who she could be totally annoying to, but maybe that wasn’t even necessary. Where did this friend she was talking to now come from? It would’ve been nice if she told me that at least. Though I guess I was just her older brother’s friend, so it wasn’t like she had a duty to give me a detailed rundown on her relationships.

“Wait. You mean you really don’t know, Senpai?”

“Know what?”

“Huh. So you *don’t* know, then. Seriously?”

“Know *what*?! What did I say?”

“I thought you had some idea and were just trying to confirm it, so I activated my annoying shields. But it looks like you seriously don’t know who I’m talking to, and so, to be honest, I feel sorry for you, so I’m gonna do the very nice and kind thing and tell you all about it.”

There had to be some kind of talent behind the way she could sound annoying even when she was honeying up her tone.

Iroha turned her phone around and pointed the screen at me. “This is my class’s LIME group.”

“Your class’s LIME group?” I parroted her like a samurai trying to pronounce the English he’d just learned during Japan’s Westernization in the Meiji era. It wasn’t that I’d never heard of LIME groups. It was just... “I didn’t know your class had one of those.”

Iroha burst out laughing.

“Wh-What the hell are you laughin’ at?!”

“I dunno why I’m surprised! A loner like you probably never realized a class would make a group chat! Sorry, I accidentally gave you a little taste of the real, grown-up world!”

“Like I care. The endless notifications you get in a big group like that are probably just annoying anyway. All those endless vibrations... I bet they’re a huge distraction. Joining a group like that would just be inefficient.”

“Check out this smug grin!”

“I’m gonna kill—roll you up so hard!”

“W-Wa— Eeeek!”

I quickly changed my threat into something not so legally dubious, and rolled up the bedsheets Iroha was sitting on—with her in them. I may have changed my words, but the spirit behind them was still there.

“Ugh! What are you doing?!”

“Just had an urge to change the sheets. It’s my room, so I can do what I want.”

“That doesn’t sound like a healthy urge to me, pal!”

“Sure, it doesn’t make sense. But enough about me; answer the question. You get a message or something?”

“Oh, this? I guess I can tell you. Just some boring invitation.” Iroha’s tone was dull as she looked at her phone.

“Invitation?”

“There’s that summer festival at the end of the month, right? The one at that shrine nearby.”

“Oh. Oh, yeah. They set off fireworks by the riverbank...”

“Yeah, that one! Someone just messaged asking who wanted to go.”

“Sounds fun. Why don’t you go?”

What was a summer vacation without a festival to go with it? It was one of the staple events of teenage life. A sparkling diamond among the repetitive summer days, where love bloomed and friendships blossomed. I’m assuming at least, since I haven’t been since I was a kid. The point is, I wanted Iroha to get herself a best friend sooner rather than later, and to do that, she needed to deepen her relationships with her classmates. That was why I wanted to really push her to go to this festival.

“I mean, I don’t hate the other kids in my class. It’s just the date...”

“You don’t have anything else to do, right?”

“Not yet, but I was thinking of doing something that day. The recording session, actually.”

“Huh? Why does it have to be that day?”

“Because if we get the recording done in the afternoon, we can go out to the festival right after! You, me, and Otoi-san!” Iroha smiled at me brightly, and I was reminded of a dog wagging its tail.

“Oh.”

I never thought of that, but it made too much sense to say no. Iroha didn’t know about my plan to find her a friend, so it was only natural she’d want to hang out with the people she knew (me and Otoi-san) at the festival over her classmates. Besides, my plan was a long-term thing, and it wasn’t urgent enough to ignore what she really wanted here.

“Okay. We’ll record on that day, head to the festival, and then call everyone after to—” I was interrupted by a familiar chime: the doorbell.

It was a single, modest ring, not the annoying multi-hit combo Iroha liked to inflict on it, but for some reason it sounded sort of...heavy, like there was something oppressive about it.

“Huh. You don’t usually get visitors at this sorta time.”

“I got a bad feeling about this.”

“Huh?”

“Listen to me, Iroha. Stay quiet, okay? I mean it.”

“Um, sure...”

I kept my footsteps as quiet as I could and snuck over to the intercom in the living room to see who my visitor was. The girl on the screen had white hair, white skin, and a white face. It was one of my other neighbors: Tsukinomori Mashiro.

“U-Um, Aki? Are you free right now?”

“Oh, hi, Mashiro. What’s up?”

“Um... It’s Sunday, isn’t it?”

“Huh? Well, yeah, but...it’s summer, so it’s not like it matters, right?”

“No, but it kinda does...”

“I don’t get what you’re saying.”

Mashiro was mumbling, fidgeting, and looking at the floor. She was bad at making her point at the best of times, but something felt particularly off today.

I studied her face. She looked paler than usual, and her words sounded like someone was poking a gun barrel in her back and making her read out a script. If there was someone like that, I couldn’t see them on the screen, though.

“Senpai? Who is it?” Iroha whispered, poking her head out of the bedroom door. She knew I was serious before and was keeping her voice down. If she was capable of keeping this quiet, I would’ve liked to see more of it in my everyday life.

“It’s Mashiro.” I was about to continue and ask Iroha to keep quiet a little longer, since Mashiro was acting so weird, but I was interrupted.

“And who might you be speaking to?”

“Guargh!”

A suave voice sounded through the intercom, and I turned back to the monitor to see an older male face filling up the entire screen. His usual good looks were thinly veiled behind a furious mask of bloodshot eyes and a tightly knit brow. There was no mistaking who he was: my uncle and Mashiro’s dad, as well as the Alliance’s connection to their future place of employment, *and* the CEO of Honeyplace Works, Tsukinomori Makoto. If he could back off and stop making me worry I was stuck in some kind of horror movie, that’d be pretty great.

“Wh-What are you yelling for, Senpai?! Actually, you sound kinda cute when you’re sca— Mmmph!”

“Don’t pretend you’re worried about me and then finish off with something that’s gonna piss me off. I told you to be quiet!”

“Mmh! Pwah! What’s wrong with you?! You can’t just shove your

hands over my mouth! You need a written letter of consent for that kinda thing, or you're gonna get arrested!"

"Says who? And in what prefecture?"



Wait, this is an emergency, not a comedy sketch!

"This is really bad, okay?! You need to get outta here right now!"

"What? But—"

"I'll explain later! Just go!"

"H-Hey! You don't have to push!"

I thrust my palms at her like a sumo wrestler, forcing her towards the window and the veranda. I felt bad for Iroha, whose eyes were darting all over the place in confusion, but I really didn't have the wherewithal to explain to her right now.

I was panicking, and it was all because of that condition in the agreement I had with Tsukinomori-san. I was supposed to act as Mashiro's (fake) boyfriend and protect her till she graduated. I wasn't allowed to date another girl until then, and I wasn't allowed to get serious with Mashiro either. I didn't know what had happened in Tsukinomori-san's youth that he now held such resentment, but I needed to play by his rules at all costs.

If he saw me with Iroha, I was screwed. *Seriously* screwed. That was why my only option was to get Iroha the hell out.

"I'll make it up to you later. For now, just head back to your own room via the veranda."

"I don't get what's happening, but it seems pretty bad. You'll fill me in later, right?"

"Yeah! Bye!"

Iroha still looked a little put out as she shoved the pile of cardboard boxes on the veranda to one side, revealing the emergency partition (with a hole in it) which separated our apartments. I could almost hear the jingle that played when she solved the puzzle, though she wasn't even wearing any green.

Like I said, the partition was only supposed to be broken in an emergency, but it got broken by accident a while back and ended up being surprisingly useful, so we never reported it. I never imagined it'd be *this* useful, though.

I checked quickly that there were no traces of Iroha left in the apartment before racing to answer the door, my clothes covered in various kinds of sweat.

"S-Sorry about that! Thank you for waiting!"

"That took a while. And what was with that screaming?"

"Th-There was a bug flying around! I just killed it!" I laughed loudly, just to make myself extra convincing.

"Oh. Make sure you're keeping this place clean, all right?"

"U-Um, what can I help you with?"

"Oh, nothing much." My uncle's smile was amicable, but it didn't reach his eyes, which were burning with a satanic bloodlust. "I just

came to test the strength of your fake relationship with my daughter.”

“Y’know, I totally forgot that you and Tsukinomori-san were fake dating.”

“We don’t really act like it, huh? Probably ’cause of Mashiro’s personality.”

“Wonder how this’ll go then.”

“At least one of us is looking forward to it...”

Chapter 1: My Cousin Is My Fake Girlfriend (and I Almost Forgot)!

I know what you're thinking, but I didn't *actually* forget that Mashiro and I were fake dating. In romantic comedies, you always see the fake couple going through various events which define their hot-and-cold relationship, but there was a reason we hadn't experienced any of that. The serious confession, which should take months (maybe ten volumes worth of light-novel content), came way too soon.

Say my life was written down in such a light novel series. I'd say Mashiro's confession was the cliffhanger to the first volume and a main plot point in the second. It came so early in our relationship, that it suddenly became very difficult to do any fake flirting and stuff like that without things getting super awkward.

Think about it. Making someone who had serious feelings for me act like she was my girlfriend when it was all a farce was a really shitty thing to do. That was why we were in limbo, and why we were dating in name only. You wouldn't be able to tell just by looking at us anymore.

"I'll get right to the point, Akiteru-kun, Mashiro. Have you been able to keep up with your fake relationship?"

We were sitting around my dining table. Mashiro and I at one end, and Tsukinomori-san at the other, like this was some kind of interrogation. He was enjoying the seasonal coffee I'd made him (a kind I was drinking a lot of this summer).

"Our classmates all think we're a couple," I said. "I can say that much."

"Yeah, we're... We've tricked them."

"I see, yes. So what are you doing to *show* them you're a couple?"

"U-Um, just...the normal stuff..." Mashiro mumbled.

"What normal stuff?"

"Umm..." Mashiro cowered back from her dad's pressing questions and fell silent.

Mashiro had agreed to be my fake girlfriend in return for her dad letting her switch schools and live by herself. This was an unbreakable promise for her as much as it was for me. Assuming her contract had the same conditions as mine, she'd already committed a huge foul. She'd fallen in love with me and confessed—a clear breach of the agreement.

“Don’t think you can get through this with nonanswers. I’m not the famous kingpin of a huge company for nothing, you know! I’d like to think I’m pretty good at judging people.”

“Ngh...”

If we wanted to talk our way out of this, we’d need to come up with something good. I made a decision and gently nudged Mashiro with my elbow.

“Mashiro,” I whispered.

“Um, yes?”

“We gotta do this.”

“Huh?”

“If we wanna get your dad to understand, we gotta commit to this a hundred percent.”

“O-Oh! Okay. If we have to...”

We kept our voices low, communicating mostly with eye contact to avoid Tsukinomori-san picking up on our conversation. It wasn’t like we’d planned anything in advance, but Mashiro and I had spent a lot of time together, and that gave us a good sense of what the other was thinking.

What was normal behavior for couples? Mashiro and I knew, because we saw things in the exact same way. I forced my eyes open wide and thrust my arm into the air, determined. Mashiro quickly followed suit.

“I’m Akiteru!”

“And I’m M-Mashiro!”

“And this is our fake date to the summer festival!” we said together.

I was kind of surprised how in sync we were. *Nice job, Mashiro.*

Okay, so it was a little cringe, but we had to show we were serious somehow.

“Mashiro! Today’s the summer festival!”

“Y-Yeah, I know!”

“W-Wanna go look round the stalls? I can work out the most efficient route!”

“Oh, but, um...I don’t like crowded places...”

“Oh, r-right. Wanna go home?”

“Y-Yeah. I just wanna chill at home...”

“Cut! Cut! What kind of date is that?!” Tsukino—sorry, I mean the director—yelled at us. Kinda harsh, considering we weren’t professional actors, hadn’t rehearsed, and didn’t even have a script. “You really think that kinda crap is gonna convince the teenage normies?! Where’s the chemistry? Do you desire for some dumb dude to dart in and devilishly drag your dame away into the distance?!”

“Cool it with the alliteration, would you?”

“Sorry for my dad, Aki. He’s so embarrassing...”

“Quiet! The only two words you guys are allowed to say from now on are ‘flirt’ and ‘love.’”

“Can I add ‘gimme,’ ‘a,’ and ‘break’ to that list?”

His dumbassery was giving me a headache. Still, I knew Tsukinomori-san was serious about this whole thing. If Mashiro and I didn’t do this properly, he might rescind his offer to hire the Alliance.

“I doubt this is the case, but could it be that you two are holding back on acting like a couple because Akiteru-kun’s got himself a *real* girlfriend?”

“Huh?!”

“What?!”

His suggestion was so specific and out of left field that my voice cracked. Did he know about Iroha? I mean, it wasn’t like she was my girlfriend or anything, *but* my uncle did show up at my place out of nowhere, so it was only natural to think that something had aroused his suspicions.

First, we had to stay calm and deal with this somehow. We had to try and keep the panic off our faces and out of our attitudes...

“A real girlfriend... Aki has a real girlfriend? A real...girlfriend?!”

Mashiro! Weren’t you listening to my inner monologue?!

And why was she *mad*?! She should know I didn’t have an actual girlfriend. Or was she jealous of some bogeyman girlfriend she’d made up in her head?

“Aki. We need to take things to the next level.”

“Wait! Calm down a second. Just because your dad said—”

“We. Need. To.”

“Yes’m!”

How come Mashiro was so withdrawn and soft spoken in the classroom but so assertive when it came to me?

Either way, I was ready for whatever Mashiro wanted to throw at me. I looked at her to let her know. Her face was set as though the desire to stab someone burned strongly within her. And then she nodded, took a deep breath, and opened her eyes wide.

“Aki! Today’s the festival! You’ll spoil me on this super special day, right?!”

“Aha ha ha! Of course! Whatever you want, princess!”

“First, there are way too many people at the shrine and it’s really scary! Would you commit genocide for me, pwetty pwease?”

“But Mashiro, that’s insane!”

“Aaand, I want you to buy me all sorts of yummys from the stalls!”

“Anything for you! Watching you eat so happily makes me all goopy inside!”

“Aw, you think I’m a big gweedy chops! You know how hard I work to make sure I look pretty enough for you every single day!”

“Aw, baby! You got some cotton candy on your cheek!”

“Come kiss it off, darling!”

Why are we doing this again?

I’d thrown myself into this whole facade headfirst, and only now was I having some post-madness clarity. I felt like we were saying some pretty weird stuff, but now I couldn’t remember any of it.

Mashiro and I stiffened, and time seemed to stop. What would Tsukinomori-san say to what he had just witnessed?

“Okay. You guys pass.”

“Hell yeah!”

“We did it, Aki!”

We bumped elbows enthusiastically to celebrate our victory.

To be honest, he’s gotta be pretty dumb to fall for something like—

“I’m gonna change tracks and say that it smells like there’s been a girl in this room.”

I froze. I didn’t realize there was a level two. And he launched his second attack the moment I got ahead of myself and let my guard down.

I guess that’s just the kind of sharp wit you need to be a CEO, I thought, before realizing I didn’t have time to marvel at him right now.

“Of course it smells like girl! Mashiro’s here!”

“No. This isn’t Mashiro’s smell. Mashiro’s my precious little girl! Do you really think I’d get her scent confused with somebody else’s?”

“Stop being creepy, dad.”

“Mashiro, that’s the kinda language that could tear open your old man’s heart from the inside and shred it to pieces, so if you could just think a little before you speak...”

Apparently, Tsukinomori-san was still sensitive enough that his daughter getting grossed out by him hurt. Personally, I thought the whole “creepy” evaluation was justified, but I wasn’t suicidal enough to point it out.

“My point is, I can smell a girl who isn’t Mashiro! You haven’t been letting in any other girls, have you, Akiteru-kun?”

“O-O-Of course not! I’m way too average to be popular with girls!”

“Hm... Yes, I believe you. You definitely still smell like a virgin.”

“I think there are some things you should keep to yourself...”

Maybe his filter started malfunctioning when he got mad like this—and Mashiro clearly didn’t like that about him.

“Hmm... Mm? Wait a second. There’s something else, Akiteru-kun.”

“What might that be? You’re not just making stuff—”

“Where’s that cat you said you were keeping? The little munchkin? I can’t see it anywhere.”

Dammit. I forgot about the cat!

Why did that stupid lie—you know, the one I made up on the spot, when Iroha was clinging to me during my phone call with Tsukinomori-san? When he’d started suspecting me of having a girlfriend? Why did that stupid lie have to come up now, after all this time, like it had all been part of some mean-spirited attempt at foreshadowing?! *Damn you, past Aki! Why did you have to say something that’d be exposed the second he’d step into your apartment?!*

“I d-developed a cat allergy. Unfortunately, I didn’t have a choice but to take it to a shelter.”

“Huh. That sounds pretty quick to develop an allergy.”

“A lot can change in three months...”

Like, for example, Mashiro could confess to me. I could realize that there was cuteness within Iroha’s annoying nature. The possibilities were endless.

“It sounds to me like a desperate excuse...but whatever.”

Tsukinomori-san frowned while twiddling his spectacular mustache. He didn’t push the matter, either because the enthusiastic performance Mashiro and I pulled off was convincing, or because it was just that pitiful he didn’t want us to do it again. Instead, his eyes took on a misty expression, and his next words were serious. “I just don’t want Mashiro to have any more negative experiences at school. All I ask is that you promise me that much.”

“Dad...”

“If you start getting on with a girl other than her, and everyone finds out, and you don’t do anything to show them that you’re serious about Mashiro...they’ll think she’s a pathetic female cuck! And when a woman’s heartbroken, that’s when the delinquents come in to steal her, whether she’s got a boyfriend or not!”

“I think you’ve been watching too many movies.”

That kind of stuff didn’t happen in real life, right? I was no expert, so I couldn’t be sure.

“I understand. Those kinda guys are the worst.”

“Mashiro...?”

“The players, normies, and delinquents. If they exist, they’re all trash. I’ve never met any, though.”

“Then don’t judge them...”

They might be perfectly respectable people who trained ceaselessly for two hours at the gym every day to increase their attractiveness. Perfectly respectable people who dressed well, and who were always ready to show any woman a good, clean time with their

extensive knowledge of date spots and restaurants—which were always up to date.

Though, if they stole other people's girlfriends... Then sure, they were still trash, no matter how hard they tried.

While Tsukinomori-san might have been getting a bit too wrapped up in his extreme delusions, I knew he really did care about Mashiro. That much was genuine. And he wanted to protect her by making me her fake boyfriend. Looking at that side of things, we probably had been a little too lax about acting like a couple.

"Do you see how important it is that you act as her fake boyfriend now?"

"Yes, sir."

"That's good to hear. Good like this coffee. Thanks." Tsukinomori-san gave a satisfied smile before rising to his feet.

"You're leaving already?"

"Yeah. I just came to chat and clear something up, really. But it doesn't look like you want to play ball."

I laughed nervously. "Aw, you make it sound like you think I'm hiding something!"

My uncle joined in on the laughter, though his was more confident. "Forgive me! Everything raises suspicions when you get to a certain age. Oh, right..."

Tsukinomori-san had his shoes back on and his hand on the doorknob before he suddenly turned around. "Tell Kohinata-san I said hi."

"Huh?" My vision went blank.

Why was he talking about her all of a sudden?

"Something wrong, Akiteru-kun? We all went out for hotpot, remember? And she lives right next door. Oh, maybe I should've called her Amachi-san."

"Huh— Oh, Amachi-san! From Tenchido! Sure, I'll tell her!"

"Pull it together a bit, yeah? Adios." With a pretentious wave of his hand, Tsukinomori-san opened the door and finally left my apartment.

I could only watch, dumbfounded, as he left. Only when I heard the sound of the door closing behind him did my heart restart itself in double time. (Not that it actually stopped; that was a metaphor.)

What was *that* all about? The conversation itself felt harmless enough, but I couldn't help but wonder if he had been trying to get me to fess up to something.

"I just hope that was all he wanted..." I sighed as I shared my anxieties with Mashiro, who stood behind me.

"Was Iroha-chan here before he showed up?"

"Hm? Oh, yeah. She sneaks in here almost on the daily."

“Oh.”

“Wait, are you mad? It’s not like we’re doing anything weird.”

“I’m not mad,” she replied, in which case I’d appreciate it if she kept the iciness from her voice. “I was just wondering, what does she even do in here if it’s almost every day?”

“Well, I guess she reads manga, watches anime, listens to music. That kinda stuff.”

“Why can’t she do that at her own place?”

She couldn’t. It was annoying that I couldn’t say anything to Mashiro, but it wasn’t really my business to tell. I got why Mashiro thought it was weird, though. Even if I was Iroha’s brother’s friend, her sneaking into my room all the time might make it look like there was something more between us. Especially since Mashiro had feelings for me. It was no wonder she didn’t like it.

“You know what Iroha’s like. She’s never heard of boundaries.”

“Hmm. I just don’t think it’s very *efficient* of you to let her pick on you so much, when she’s not even part of the Alliance.” Mashiro glanced at me as if checking my reaction.

Why does everyone look like they’re trying to read my mind today?

“She’s Ozu’s sister. Looking out for her is part of looking out for the smooth running of the Alliance. You’re not in the Alliance either, y’know.”

Mashiro’s eyes widened. “I-I know. I know that’s what you think.”

“What I *think*? What?”

“D-Details! Stop nitpicking. I-I just... You’re not just letting Iroha-chan do what she wants because...because you l-like her or something, right?” Mashiro asked, anxious.

I didn’t need to think twice about my answer to *that*. The answer was the same whether she was asking me about Iroha or herself.

“Course not. The Alliance is my top priority right now. But...”

Love and youth. If facing those things meant I could serve my creative team better... If pushing through those inefficient things led to an efficient way to grow, then...

“I don’t wanna deny that youth and romantic attraction and that kinda thing can be valuable experiences anymore. That doesn’t mean I see Iroha in that way, though, of course.”

“Are you saying...you have time to do fake coupley stuff with me now?”

“Huh? Well, when you put it like that, I guess technically I am.”

“Oh. You’re not...hiding anything, are you?”

“Wha— Um, nope! Nothing.”

Mashiro stared at me. For a second I thought I saw her frown.

“Mashiro?”

“N-No. It’s nothing.”

I must have been imagining things. Of course, I *was* hiding something, and it was sending a cold sweat sliding down my back. I watched Mashiro carefully for her reaction, which was when she opened her tiny mouth and said something I never expected to hear.

“If we don’t need to worry about Iroha-chan,” she paused, “do you wanna go on a fake date?”

“A fake date?”

We had recently come back from a stay at a villa belonging to UZA Bunko’s star idol editor, Kiraboshi Kanaria. She was everything I aspired to be, and she taught me that sometimes it was necessary for producers to have “dirty” desires, like thinking people are cute or wanting to take part in inefficient experiences linked to love and youth.

That was why I decided to be a little less strict on myself, but I was pretty sure that didn’t mean I had any romantic interest in Iroha, and as for Mashiro, I didn’t really know either...

The point is, I was too inexperienced to know what romantic feelings were supposed to be like. In other words, yeah, I’m a virgin. Sorry about that.

Anyway, that stuff aside, Mashiro and I were supposed to be acting as a couple.

“Your dad’s kinda doubting us, huh?”

“He might start watching us. Like, send spies into school or something.”

“Right... And if we’re not acting like a proper couple...”

“Yeah. There are a lot of cute girls you interact with at school. If you get along better with them than me, we might not be able to fool him.”

“Makes sense...”

“It’ll be bad if dad finds out that I l-like you for real, but...I don’t think I’d mind too much.”

“Makes...sense?”

I wasn’t too thrilled about doing the trashy thing and enjoying a date with her. Not when I knew how she felt and had effectively put the answer to her confession on hold. Still, we had to fool Tsukinomori-san somehow.

“You don’t have to do anything, Aki.”

“What?”

“It’ll be hard for you to plan something like that, right? It’ll feel like you’re taking advantage of my feelings... So leave the fake date plan to me. I don’t want you to feel guilty about anything.”

“I don’t wanna make you do all the work either, though.”

“Shut up.”

“Yes, ma’am...”

It had been a while since she spoke so coldly to me. The familiar ice seemed to warm my heart somehow.

“Don’t worry, Aki.” There was a soft smugness about Mashiro’s smile as she shot me a thumbs-up. “I’ll put together a date plan that’s a hundred percent perfect and successful!”

“Well, this sounds like it’s all gonna end in tears.”

“I feel like you’re joking, but honestly? Same.”



05th Floor Alliance (4)



...



Makigai Namako

I got a question about a friend's friend's friend.



OZ

So about you?



Makigai Namako

Grr... You know most people go along with it at first, right?



AKI

You shouldn't expect OZ to be able to pick up on those complex social cues.



Murasaki Shikibu-sensei

huh? your friends are in a 3-way homosexual relationship?



Makigai Namako

I did not say that.



AKI

Feel free to ignore Shikibu's complex and tone-deaf interpretations.



OZ

You wanted advice on something personal, right?



Makigai Namako

Don't spell it out.



Makigai Namako

Whatever. I just wanna know a good date spot for this time of year.



OZ

No way. You get yourself a girlfriend?



Makigai Namako

Something like that.



AKI

Nice. Popular college guys who are best-selling authors are in a different league.



Makigai Namako

Praising me won't get you anything.



OZ

In dating sims they always go to summer festivals this time of year.



AKI

Yeah. We didn't put one in Koyagi, though, because it didn't quite fit the world.



AKI

A lot of mobile games are doing summer festival events right now.



Makigai Namako

A summer festival? I see...



OZ

Watching fireworks as a couple is said to be pretty romantic.



OZ

And not because you're enjoying learning about explosions.



AKI

I'd hate to think there are couples who go for that side of things...



Murasaki Shikibu-sensei

i miss firework shows. i used to watch them alone from my balcony as a teenager.



AKI

That's pretty sad. Should've kept it to yourself.

AKI

AKI

But yeah, I think a summer festival is a good idea.



Makigai Namako

You think so too, AKI?

AKI

AKI

I haven't gone to one in ages myself.

AKI

AKI

I used to go every summer with my cousins when I was little.



Murasaki Shikibu-sensei

huh. you remember that far back?

AKI

AKI

Sure. Nowadays it's a pretty inefficient event, though.

AKI

AKI

Sometimes it's nice to enjoy that kind of thing, like you're a kid again.



Makigai Namako

You've kinda changed since you went to the beach, AKI.



Makigai Namako

I get it... This might work now.

AKI

AKI

Yup. 'Tis the season for summer festivals.



Makigai Namako

TY. This was helpful.

AKI

AKI

Good luck with your date!



Makigai Namako

Thanks!

Chapter 2: My Work Partner Bought Some Souvenirs for Me!

AKI: What about doing the recording session next week Sunday?

Otoi: Right at the end of the month? Eh, sure.

AKI: There's a summer festival on. You know, the one at the shrine? With fireworks?

Otoi: Oh, yeah.

AKI: I thought we could get the recording done in the afternoon.

Otoi: You two going on a date to the festival together? Cute.

AKI: No, I actually wanted to ask you something about that.

Otoi: Yeah?

AKI: Are you already back home?

Otoi: I'm taking the express bus back tonight.

AKI: Got it. I'll contact you again in a few days then, give you some time to settle.

Otoi: Hm. Wanna meet tomorrow?

AKI: Tomorrow? Won't you be tired from traveling?

Otoi: Nah, I'll sleep on the bus. You can help carry my bags back to my house then.

AKI: What am I, your slave? I mean, I'll do it, since you do a ton of stuff for us, but still.

Otoi: Thanks.

AKI: When should I get to the station?

Otoi: 4 in the morning?

AKI: You're a monster...

That was the LIME conversation I had yesterday evening with Otoi-san, right after my uncle launched his assault. I had rushed into bed the second it was over so that I could at least get some sleep. I woke up again before the sun had fully risen, and before the morning calisthenics program on the radio.

Even Iroha didn't boot up this early in the morning, so there was

nobody to take advantage of my half-awake state and get on my nerves. It was with a sense of relief that I changed into a tracksuit and did some gentle stretches so I was ready to jog.

Why go jogging when I was supposed to be meeting someone? I had a daily fitness routine, and I couldn't think of a more efficient way to get some exercise in than a jog before my meeting with Otoi-san. I'd been going out early for a jog around three times a week since the start of the summer vacation. I needed to fit this run in now; my talk with Otoi-san today was going to take a while.

I hear you thinking, "What kind of guy would go to meet a girl in a sweaty tracksuit? Are you insane?!"

Don't worry about that. Otoi-san isn't the kind of person to care about what I'm wearing. I had to go see her in cosplay when I was back in middle school, and she didn't even bat an eye. In fact, I could probably go see her totally naked and— Okay, *maybe* that's a little bit of a stretch.

When I stepped out of my apartment building, the sky was a color halfway between ultramarine and amber. There was still some cloying warmth in the air, but the cool, refreshing wind against my skin more than made up for it.

I set off at a steady pace, half wondering whether I should set back my alarm to start exercising even earlier during summer; these conditions were perfect. It was definitely a weird time to be going to the station to pick up a classmate returning from vacation, though. I wouldn't have thought much of it before, but now that I was, I realized it was a situation that could easily be misinterpreted—if it weren't Otoi-san, that is. There was nothing in our relationship to suggest anything more would come of it, and there never would be.

I carried on, keeping my guard up just in case Tsukinomori-san was watching me somehow, and arrived at the station in just over ten minutes. This town had a good amount of activity, but the first train hadn't left yet, so the station was deserted. That was why finding Otoi-san, who sent me a message that simply said "here" a few minutes ago, was as easy as spotting an oasis in the desert.

"Sorry to keep you waiting."

"Huh? Oh. Hi." Otoi-san had been sitting on her huge suitcase and staring off into space. When she spotted me, she raised a lazy hand.

"Hi. Uh, what are you wearing?"

"Is it weird?"

"It's, uh, not weather appropriate."

"Oh, y'mean this?" Otoi-san asked, pulling at the fabric over her chest.

Her casual, short-sleeved top was fine, but the scarf she wore with it was totally out of place. It may have been early, but we were still in

the height of summer. Wearing something so warm right now was weird enough in itself, but it wasn't helped by the fact that she had as many shirt buttons open as decency would allow, displaying a lot of her chest to the world. What the heck was going through her head?

If she's warm, she should take the scarf off. If she's cold, she should button up.

She was as off-balance...or careless...or sloppy...as ever. Pick one.

"It was cold where I went."

"Cold in midsummer? Where did you go?"

"Mount Osore."

"Isn't that place supposed to lead to the underworld? Why is everyone around me trying to turn my life into a horror movie?"

Kageishi Village had been just as spooky. I knew summer was the season for that kind of thing, but you'd think these guys could cut me some slack.

Mount Osore was that creepy, mystical place up in Aomori. Apparently, that's where you can find the Sanzu River—the river dead people are supposed to cross to the afterlife. Otoi-san said she was going to go work on her sensitivity to improve her music composition up there, but what a weird place to pick. She did mention wanting to escape the heat, and while I didn't doubt Mount Osore was cool, it wasn't the first place I'd think of going. I felt like she'd be more likely to improve her sensitivity to spirits rather than anything related to music.

Otoi-san pulled a Suckie from her pocket and tore off the lollipop's wrapper before placing it in her mouth, staring up thoughtfully at around a seventy-degree angle.

"Maybe it's 'cause *Koyagi*'s a horror game."

She made a good point.

"They say stand users attract other stand users, right? It's probably that kinda thing, like you're workin' on a horror game so you're cursed or somethin'. I've heard it's a thing."

"I think I'd have been happier not knowing that, thanks."



I knew it was just superstition and that there wasn't anything to be scared of...but I still made a mental note in red to buy ten more protective charms from the shrine in town.

"Okay, so Mount Osore was cold, but why'd you wear that scarf all the way home?"

"Takin' it off would've been a pain."

"It doesn't match your outfit at all. You're like a sloth with zero fashion sense."

"That's funny."

I insulted her, but she didn't care at all. That's Otoi-san for you. But then, like I thought, she didn't seem to care about my tracksuit either. I already said she didn't care about what I wore, but there was more to it: she didn't care about what she herself wore either.

"Luckily, there's no one around at this time in the morning, so it's not like people are gonna be staring at you."

"Wanna grab a beef bowl or somethin'?"

"Wouldn't a diner or karaoke make more sense?"

Those were the places more likely to be open twenty-four hours a day, but from the look on Otoi-san's face, she didn't appreciate my remark. That was what it looked like to me, at least. Most people would probably think she looked just as expressionless as always, but after knowing her for so long, I could tell when she was grumpy.

"Karaoke's too loud. 'Specially at this time of morning, when it's only overexcited drunks."

"Oh yeah. And then they end up coming into your room by mistake."

"Yeah, that happened to us in middle school, right?"

"Didn't we agree not to bring that up again?"

"Our time as delinquents? Yeah..."

"I mean, I wouldn't go that far...but now that you mention it, I can't think of a better word that describes two middle schoolers going to karaoke in the dead of night."

"We had a good reason, though. Well, 'sno point talkin' about the past anyway."

She was spot on. What was more inefficient than talking about stuff you couldn't change? Otoi-san stopped herself; she must have remembered the promise we made: to not to bring serious past matters into the present. I decided to help change the topic with a question that was on my mind.

"Okay, so karaoke's out, but why didn't you jump on the diner idea? They have desserts there, y'know."

"I've tried all the diners 'round here. Kinda sick of 'em, to be honest."

“First-world problems much?”

“Plus, I picked up some pretty great sweets in Aomori. I thought I could eat ’em when I get home, but first I wanna fill up on a beef bowl.”

“You’re totally devoted to developing your sweet tooth, huh? But sure, let’s go grab a beef bowl then. I’ll carry your stuff.”

“Thanks.” Otoi-san pointed at her luggage on the ground.

“Ungh! Is this everything? I’m gonna be lucky to have any arms left...”

One look at the mountain of paper bags collected haphazardly on the ground was enough to tell anyone Otoi-san had just been on vacation.

“Sorry. You’ll get a reward, though. Hope you’re excited.”

“A reward?”

Maybe it was a souvenir or something. My question was casual, but the reply she came back with weighed heavier than a stone.

“I’m gonna share my *melons* with you.”

“Come again?”

Did I say heavier than a stone? Maybe heavier than a melon would’ve worked better.

She said “melons” in italics too, right? My gaze was naturally drawn to... Well, I don’t think I have to tell you. And now I was suddenly conscious of how thin her clothes were, how insanely huge her chest was (which looked extra sweet because of how she wore her top open), and that I could just make out the color of her underwear through her clothes. All because she said one word.

“When you say you’re gonna share your melons...”

“I mean I’m gonna share my melons. That’s all. Wanna try ’em now?”

“What, here?!”

“Oh, wait, your hands are full. I’ll feed you then.”

“You’re taking the lead?!”

I blinked, and suddenly the distance between Otoi-san and me had closed without me having time to defend myself. It had been mere seconds since she’d tempted me into looking at her melons; that had been daring enough, but now she was completely breaking my shield and following it up with a smash attack that was enough to send me flying right off the screen.

That was exactly what would be happening if we were playing the world-famous fighting game published by Tenchido, but right now it was more important for me to hold on to my nerves, so I squeezed my eyes shut and tried to reclaim the distance between us. I just needed to control the space around us, and everything would be fine...

“Don’t run away or I won’t get this in your mouth.”

“W-Wait, what are you sticking in my mouth? Y’know, this is getting a bit we—”

“Weird” was what I wanted to say, but the word was cut off by something being shoved between my lips. It was mostly soft and smooth, with slightly hard lumps here and there. A silky liquid spread over my tongue, sweet yet a little sour at the same time. It reminded me of fruit.

“Yeah, I was talkin’ about candy. The traditional stuff, that is.”

“It’s good...”

It didn’t just taste like fruit. It *was* fruit. When I opened my eyes, I was confronted with Otoi-san’s usual blank face, along with some sort of confectionary held between her pale, delicate fingers. The confectionary itself had been bitten in half. Glacé apple was enveloped in a buttery pastry; it was a Japanese-style apple pie.

“I know, right? This is s’posed to be a famous treat you can buy in Aomori.”

“Huh? But why were you talking about melons?”

“Melons...” Otoi-san frowned and looked at the packaging. There, written in a script that was somehow both fancy and simple, was the word “apple.”

“Oh yeah. I meant apples. My bad.”

“Jeez. You had me going.”

“Apples, melons, what’s the big deal?”

“Don’t worry. There is no big deal...”

No way in hell was I going to explain it to her. Explain that, for a second, I thought she might seriously have stuck one of her melons into my mouth. Though if I did, she’d probably just say I was “funny” in a deadpan tone and move on.

Funny? More like crazy. No matter how weird our relationship was, I knew she’d never do anything like that in public.

“You say some weird stuff sometimes, Aki. Aumph.”

I gaped at her. She’d just taken the rest of the pie—that I had already taken a bite of—and shoved it in her mouth without batting an eye, as though it were the most natural thing in the world.

“No matter how weird our relationship was...” I’d said. But maybe it was even weirder than I thought. Maybe I really should prepare myself for some surprise melons in my mouth at some point. I decided I should probably have my guard up just a little higher around her from now on.

When we arrived at the beef bowl restaurant, Otoi-san and I grabbed a four-person table all for ourselves. Under normal circumstances, it’d be an inconsiderate thing to do, but there was

literally nobody else there given how early it was. I ordered myself a medium portion before starting to explain why I'd wanted to talk to her.

"I wanna get Iroha a friend in her own grade."

This wasn't work-related. I wasn't asking this of the Alliance's trusted outside member. I was asking this of the friend who'd been looking out for Iroha with me since middle school.

"Kohinata's got a lotta friends."

"Yeah, friends she made by being in honor-student mode. I wanna find her a best friend; someone she can annoy as much as she annoys me."

"She's finally annoyed you so much you wanna pass the buck to someone else?"

"No, it's the opposite actually."

Otoi-san's eyes sparkled with interest while the rest of her face looked totally unimpressed. It might have sounded like a contradiction, but that was exactly what it looked like, and it was something only she could pull off.

I mustered up all the passion that trip to the beach had fueled me with, and curled up my fists like the president of the USA making an empowering speech at the end of a patriotic Hollywood movie. "I've finally realized something!"

"Oh?"

"Her annoyingness is also—no, I mean it *is*—charming!"

"This beef's good."

"Would you listen?!"

"I'm listenin'. But this beef's yummy," Otoi-san replied, gulping down the medium-sized beef bowl that had been placed in front of her while we'd been speaking.

"I didn't realize you had an appreciation for foods that aren't laden with sugar."

"Yeah, I'm tryna be more healthy."

"I wouldn't call beef bowls healthy exactly..."

"Sgot protein in it. Probably some other good stuff in there y'just can't see."

It sounded like she was experiencing some weird variant of the placebo effect. She got through about half of her bowl before, seemingly having had enough for the moment, taking a slug of her chilled water.

"Kay, so why do I hafta listen to you gush about Kohinata again?"

"I'm not gushing; I'm talking from a director's perspective."

I always thought Iroha's tendency to get on my nerves was a weakness. As long as she kept her mouth shut, she was a sweet, pure, and well-liked girl. I was sure if any of the guys into her at school saw

what she was really like, they'd be disillusioned. I thought Iroha reverting to a gentle nature at school was a key to her success that shouldn't be discouraged, so I'd left it alone. Until now.

"Since I realized it was charming, I feel like I wanna share it a little more with people. I'm not saying *everyone*; she might need to keep wearing her good girl mask when she's out and about...but I was hoping, maybe she could make just one friend that she could really be herself with."

"Right, and that's why you wanted to talk to me?"

"Yeah. I wanted you to help me come up with some kind of plan, since you've helped guide Iroha in her voice acting with me all this time."

"I don't remember signin' up for this kinda stuff...but sure, I'll do it. Whatever."

"Thanks so much!"

"I was thinkin' about graduation too. People're always tellin' me not to think I'll be at school forever."

Those people were right.

"I didn't realize you were thinking about the future. What brought this on?"

"I was lookin' at the Sanzu River and started thinkin' 'bout how my life's gonna end."

"So it's Mount Osore's fault."

I always saw Otoi-san as somebody who was introspective and mature for her age, but now she'd jumped right past that and was talking like a senior citizen. I guess her trip to increase her sensitivity for her work with music was a success in more ways than one...right?

"Kay, so we wanna get Kohinata a best friend. I guess our main problem is that she doesn't seem to want one."

"Yeah, all of this is mainly to satisfy myself right now."

"She probably hasn't thought about it 'cause she's comfortable right now with us, and Tsukinomori, and the Alliance. I'd also feel way better if she made a friend before we all disappear and leave her behind all lonely and by herself. It'd make it easier to go back to the future."

"Remember this is real life and not a sci-fi movie, Doctor Otoi."

"You pick out stuff like that so easily, Aki. It's impressive. But also whatever."

Otoi-san had the rare talent to be both impressed and unimpressed at the same time. It was a talent that made her genuinely the most efficient person I'd ever met and got along with.

"Probably the best thing to do first is to look into her classroom relationships."

"Iroha's?"

“Yeah. Like who she gets along with at school other than us.”

“Good idea. I’ve heard she’s popular in her class, but never anything more specific than that.”

Who was she close to in her grade? Which girls did she talk to, which boys confessed to her, and which classmates invited her to hang out? Now that I thought about it, I didn’t know anything about who Iroha was in her own classroom. Though I guess I wouldn’t know that much about her private life; I was just her brother’s friend who happened to live in the apartment next door.

“They say you gotta start at the bottom to work your way up, but if you can stay at the bottom without climbin’, that’s way easier.”

That wasn’t how the idiom went, but I couldn’t be bothered to comment. She was saying we should start to look for Iroha’s friend in the most likely place first, and things might go more smoothly than expected. Annoyingly enough, I hadn’t thought of that myself.

“Her classmates, huh? Actually, I found out she was in her class’s LIME chat. They were inviting her to the summer festival.”

“Huh.”

I stared at Otoi-san as she picked at the last of her beef bowl with her chopsticks. She reacted as though I hadn’t said anything interesting at all. So I asked her, “Wait, you’re not in a LIME chat with your class, are you, Otoi-san?”

“Nah. Too much of a pain. I just tell ’em I don’t have a phone.”

“I knew you wouldn’t let me down, Otoi-san! We’re the same, you and I!”

“What’re you so happy for?”

Iroha made fun of me for not knowing about LIME group chats before, but finding out I had an ally in Otoi-san made me want to cry tears of joy.

Take that, Iroha! I’m not the only loner in our school!

I knew it wasn’t really anything to celebrate, but I felt relieved all the same. Sometimes humans weren’t exactly logical.

Anyway.

“I guess this is kind of what I was leading up to. I was hoping we could try and convince Iroha to go to the festival with her classmates when we’re done with the recording.”

“That’s gonna be tough. I’m bettin’ she wants to go with you, right?”

“To be more accurate, she said she wanted to go with you and me.”

“Okay, well, if that’s what she wants, y’don’t feel bad tellin’ her to go with someone else?”

“I guess. But it turns out I can’t go with her anyway.”

“Hm?” Otoi-san stared at me vacantly, with her disposable

chopsticks still in her mouth.

I explained to her about the warning Tsukinomori-san gave me. That I was playing the part of Mashiro's boyfriend in exchange for his hiring of the Alliance, and that if Mashiro and I got into a real relationship, I started seeing someone else, or made it *look* like I was seeing someone else, I'd be breaking our agreement.

"Huh." As usual, Otoi-san answered like I'd just told her tomorrow's weather, but then she frowned slightly. "What about this then?"

"This? What's 'this'?"

"I'm a girl too, right? Isn't this kinda like a beef bowl date?"

"It's not like he's gonna be watching me before the sun's even up properly."

"Yeah, and it's not like I'm pretty enough to make him suspicious either."

"Uh... You are."

"No, I'm not. I never bother doing my hair or wearing proper clothes."

She was right, in that she didn't take care of her appearance like any of the "popular" kids in her class, but on the flip side, that fact that she could still look good despite that made her seem more genuine.

"Even as one of the quieter kids, I could still look good if I dressed as well as Tsukinomori..."

"Oh, yeah, she knows how to present herself. You think so too?"

"Course. I mean, she wears earrings to high school. If that's not fashion, I dunno what is."

"Hey, you're right!"

Though they were clip-ons; it was so like Mashiro not to have the courage to get actual holes poked through her ears.

"Then there's the way she does her hair and her makeup. She's gotta be the most fashionable girl you hang out with, Aki."

"Maybe, but she's a lot like us in some ways. She's got this gloomy side, like, she barely talks to anyone at school, and she spends most of her days off at home."

"Yeah, that's probably *why* she dresses up."

"What d'you mean?"

"It's like she's armin' herself. Like she's so introverted that she can't bring herself to go out unless she's armed to the teeth, but she's still fashionable. Get it?"

"Yeah. I never thought about it like that before."

Girls sure were complicated creatures. They would allow a single, simple idea to influence their decision-making and then end up shooting in a completely different direction. Part of the reason it'd

been difficult to teach Ozu how to communicate with other humans was that I didn't understand stuff like this myself.

"Anyhoo, what I'm sayin' is, no one's gonna get the wrong idea when you're with an unappealin' girl like me."

"I'd disagree, but I don't think arguing's gonna help anything. I'll let it slide for now."

"Kay."

"Anyway, back to the Iroha thing. If I go to the festival with her and Tsukinomori-san finds out through his surveillance network, the Alliance will lose everything. And I want to get Iroha a best friend who can see how great she is when she's her usual annoying self. There's a solution that can solve both those problems at once."

"Gettin' Kohinata to go to that festival with people from her class. But you dunno how to get her to do that, yeah?"

"That's it. And I don't wanna hurt her feelings either; I gotta persuade Iroha to go, without making her think it's because we don't wanna hang with her. I couldn't come up with anything on my own, so I wanted to get your opinion."

"I gotcha." Otoi-san fell into a thoughtful silence, her eyes drowsy as she poked the bottom of her empty bowl with her chopsticks. After what felt like at least ten minutes, but what was really just a few seconds, she spoke again. "Why don'tcha try followin' her?"

"You don't mess around, huh?"

"I mean it. Can't do anythin' if y'don't know anythin' about Kohinata's relationship with her classmates. Might be that she can't stand 'em. And you don't wanna force her to do anythin' she doesn't wanna do, right?"

"Yeah, but still..."

The reason I was planning all of this was because I thought it would benefit Iroha. I couldn't bear it if I ended up sticking my nose into her business just for her to end up unhappy.

"I dunno about stalking her..."

"Don't stalk then, just keep an eye on her. She already comes into your room without askin', so I reckon it's fine to be a little underhanded yourself, y'know."

"Yeah, that makes—wait, no way!" I firmly shook my head.

No matter how close you are to someone, it's important to respect boundaries.

"Y'sure are honest. But yeah, that's all I got. You can do what you want with it."

"Okay. Thanks for talking about it with me."

"No worries. Now you can help carry my stuff back."

"Tch. I was hoping you'd forgotten about that..."

Otoi-san was an airhead. But even she knew a fair deal meant

both giving and receiving.

After I helped carry Otoi-san's mountains of luggage to her house, she gave me some apple snacks and I was on my way home again. When I got back, the sun was completely up. According to the clock, it was seven in the morning. If school was on right now, this was the time Iroha'd be bursting into my room. Instead, she showed up about a hundred seconds after I had stepped into the elevator and opened my door, and said something I never expected to hear from her.

“Senpai! I give you total permission to stalk me!”

Another hundred minutes, and I'd be facing social slaughter.

“I feel like you've left out something really important for this story to make any sense.”

“It was so shocking, I couldn't remember it properly. But I'll fill in the gaps now, okay?”

Chapter 3: I Have It In for My Friend's Little Sister's Privacy!

Let me explain what happened in a little more detail.

The second I got home, I was greeted with a loud shout that rattled my eardrums.

“Ah! Senpai! What are you doing, coming home so early in the morning?!”

I didn't have to see who had shouted to know it was Kohinata Iroha. She was in her uniform and puffing out her cheeks in anger. I couldn't be bothered to point out that she was the one who let herself into my apartment while I wasn't even home like it was nothing.

“Stop shouting so early in the morning. You're gonna annoy the neighbors.”

“The neighbors are just us, Mashiro-senpai, and Sumire-chan-sensei! So I can shout all I want!”

“Just because you know them doesn't give you the right to be a nuisance. Especially Mashiro—she's terrifying when you interrupt her sleep. I remember her nodding off in the classroom once. You're lucky you weren't there.” The mere memory of how grumpy Mashiro got when she was sleep-deprived was enough to send a shiver down my spine.

Not to mention there were people living on the floors below us that Iroha should be thinking of too.

“Quit changing the subject. What were you— Hey, what's with that bag?”

“Otoi-san gave me these from her trip.”

“Huh?”

I pushed the paper bag towards Iroha before taking my shoes off and coming into the apartment.

“You went to see Otoi-san?”

“Yeah.”

“Wait, you mean you two... Y'know, I did *get* that vibe from you guys, actually...”

“Stop with the delusions already. We were just discussing when to do the recording, and since I was there, I helped her take her bags back to her house.”

“Oh, so you were being her butler or something, huh? Aha ha! Yeah, it's not like you're capable of getting caught up in anything

scandalous! That's why you're a level nine virgin, now and forever!"

"Why level nine? Ugh, you know what, say whatever you want."

I didn't tell her anything about how I had been discussing the whole friendship plan thing with Otoi-san. Technically, I didn't lie to her; I just didn't tell her...so it shouldn't count as being dishonest. There was also one more thing I wanted to comment on, so I decided to do just that, as was my duty.

"How come you're in uniform?"

"Oh! Right, I gotta tell you! That's why I came here, but you weren't here, and I was left stranded like a cat in a tree without a ladder!"

I didn't have time to question whether cats knew how to use ladders before she continued.

"Senpai! I give you total permission to stalk me!"

Okay.

Wait.

What?

Right, so clearly I'd misheard her. No way she'd say something so nonsensical and confusing like that out of the blue.

"What should I have for breakfast..."

"Oh my God, why are you so good at ignoring me?! Stop slipping back into your everyday routine and listen!"

"Ever heard of normalcy bias?"

"Oooh, so getting permission to stalk me is a big enough deal to trigger that kinda sociopsychological stuff? All you've done is show off how impactful my cuteness really is!"

"It's like, seven. Why are you so hyper? And you still haven't told me why you're in uniform."

"Oh, right. It's 'cause I gotta go to school today."

"But it's not a school day and you're not in any clubs. With your grades, you shouldn't need any extra lessons either."

"We're preparing for the school festival. I was supposed to be helping before too, but ended up skipping out by going to the beach, so I can't get out of the rest of the work. It's tough being an honor student, y'know!"

"Oh yeah. I forgot the festival's on at the start of the semester. Depending on what each class is doing, it makes sense that some of them have to start work during the vacation."

"What about you, Senpai?"

"I've got more important things to do than help out with something that most teenagers throw away so much of their time to, *just* so they can have some extra meaningless fun for a few hours."

"Whoa. Your ability to reject your own youth never fails to amaze me!"

“Okay, to be honest, it’s more because no one seems to care much what I think about this kinda stuff. They do fine without me.”

I didn’t ask to be let out of the preparations for the festival, but nobody gave me a job to do anyway. That was one of the perks of being someone who faded into the background. One of the very efficient perks, I might add.

People had been paying more attention to me after Mashiro declared me her boyfriend, but before I realized it, everyone had forgotten about that, and I was part of the furniture again. There had to be some kind of weird force field around me or something. Thinking about it, it was hard to picture a piece of furniture being able to protect its fake girlfriend, so maybe Tsukinomori-san was right to be anxious.

“What’s your class doing then, Senpai?”

“Macho café.”

“That sounds kinda gross. I mean...what is it?”

“There’s gonna be training equipment at every seat, and they’re gonna be serving special protein coffee apparently.”

“Uh. Okay, that’s not as out there as it sounded. But how did your class come up with it?”

“The most popular guy in the class has gotten really into his muscle training lately. He started getting a lot of the others involved, and before we knew it, he had enough people on his side to outvote everyone else.”

The guy I was talking about was the same guy I told way back that Sumire was into men who liked macho men. His story was a tragic one. I couldn’t even remember what this dude looked like; if my life was getting recorded in some kind of book, he would only have appeared for a few lines at most.

He started going to the gym to get into macho men, while also training himself to try and capture Sumire’s attention. In the end, he forgot all about his original goal and ended up obsessed with muscle training himself. Eh, though I guess if he got himself into better shape and was happy, maybe it wasn’t such a tragic tale after all.

“I guess it takes all kinds... Y’know, I thought my class was doing something weird, but it’s not *that* weird.”

“Oh yeah? What’s your class doing?”

“Maid café. Moe, moe, kyun!”

“R-Right.”

Was the “moe moe kyun” thing still actually a thing? It wasn’t like I was in touch with the current state of maid cafés, so I guess there was a chance they hadn’t changed much from the past.

“The maids are gonna be based on the prim and proper British type. The uniforms are gonna be proper too, made from the same

high-quality stuff as the real thing.”

“Gotcha. So your uniform’s gonna be real, but your personality’s gonna be faked. You gonna be okay?”

“Of course! All I need to do is act well enough and that fake personality’ll *become* real. Just gotta keep the whole pure and polite thing going!”

“Acting to make something fake become real, huh? I guess that could work.”

That much was shown by the famous Stanford Prison experiment. Give a group of people their roles and a realistic setting, and their behaviors could be made to change. It was pretty frightening to think of, that somebody could commit to an act so much that in the end, it became who they truly were.

But when I thought about whether Iroha was actually capable of being totally taken over by the pure and sensible attributes that came with being a maid, and my answer would have to be a big fat no.

I didn’t know what might happen after I graduated and she stopped seeing me as much, though. I guess it really was my urgent duty, as her annoying director, to find her a friend she could be a full-on pain with. Otherwise, her charming mix of annoying and cute might not survive into the future.

Anyway, there was something more pressing I wanted to ask about right now.

“Okay, so your class is running a maid café. What’s that gotta do with me stalking you?”

“Right!” I was presented with Iroha’s index finger inches away from my nose. And boy was it annoying. “Look, isn’t it super unfair that I’ve gotta go into school while you get to hang out here in your room?! I gotta bust my ass off putting together the café. Meanwhile, you get to stay here, where it’s air-conditioned, and sit around reading manga!”

“That’s what you get to do most days, when everyone else around you is hard at work...”

“That’s why I need you to join me, Senpai! The stubborn Board of Education can’t be bothered to put proper air conditioning in the classrooms, and so I gotta slave away in the heat just to have this ‘wonderful’ student experience! And I’m not evil enough to force you to help out or anything, which is why I’m giving you permission to just stalk me and nothing else!”

“I feel like your sense of logic’s melted in the heat. But, you know...”

This might have been the exact opportunity I’d been looking for. Otoi-san had already suggested stalking as a method to learn more about Iroha’s friendships. I thought that was just a little too creepy,

but if Iroha herself was giving me permission, then maybe...

"I guess I could."

"Huh?"

"I've never really had the chance to see what you're like with people in your class. There, uh, might be stuff I could learn that'll help me in producing your voice acting talent. Yeah."

"Huuuh?"

"What?"

It felt like I was trying to convince myself more than her. Iroha was currently staring at me with a very meaningful gaze indeed. There was even something theatrical about the way she grinned at me, as though it were fine-tuned to irritate me as much as humanly possible.

"Guess I have no choice, seeing as you're so keen to spend any time you can with me!"

"Guh?!"

"Oh, but I totally get it! We've been together every day during the vacation so far, so it's no wonder the thought of spending a day apart without any warning fills you with despair! You just can't bear it, can you?! I completely understand!"

"You're getting way too ahead of yourself, dumbass! You're totally off the mark!"

"How come you're getting so mad then?" Iroha chortled.

"I-I'm gonna have breakfast! You go grab your stuff! When I'm done, we'll go to school!"

"Yes, master!" Iroha replied like a stock-standard maid and curtsied to me before scampering off to her own apartment.

I sighed as I watched her go. When I turned to go into the kitchen, I realized that I wasn't sure what stalking somebody actually involved.

There's something weird about school during the vacation. Normally, the boisterous chattering of students spilled out of the buildings. Now, it was so quiet inside that the shrill chirping of cicadas could be heard. Together with the sunlight burning on the asphalt, it created an almost unsettling atmosphere. It felt like a 3D game with an engine that couldn't properly render NPCs, so the devs focused on making the graphics as realistic as possible instead.

There were a few students here and there who were preparing for the festival, and at the school gates there was a handmade sign that read "Nevermore Festival."

That name had nothing to do with our school by the way; it was just the fancy name of the school festival. Presumably it was "nevermore" as in, each time it was run was totally unique, but my secret hunch was that it was named such because whoever came up

with it never wanted to go through the work of putting together a pain in the ass festival like that ever again. Not that I had any proof.

By the way, I never really cared about what school I went to, so its name never really crossed my mind, but in case you're wondering, it's Kouzai High School. It's the top school in the area for students hoping to attend college.

The school was quiet, but there was still a spark of festival spirit in the air. Yet the school remained gloomy (just like me) as I stood in front of its gates with....no, *without*, Iroha.

In fact, we hadn't even walked to school together.

Iroha: Can you, like, stop? What was even the point of us going together?

AKI: Stop turning around. Keep going as quickly as you were.

Iroha: You're the bad guy, stalking me right now! Why do I have to listen to you?!

When we'd walked to school, we kept a minimum ten-meter distance between us. Iroha went ahead, while I followed her. If we wanted to communicate, we used LIME. Understandably, Iroha wasted no time in asking why I'd mandated we walk like this.

"Why would I walk next to you if I'm supposed to be stalking you?"

It was that question which had cinched my victory in the argument.

If I was going to stalk her, I was determined to do it properly.

Okay, if I'm being honest, my main worry was that Tsukinomori-san was watching me somehow, and I didn't want to risk walking next to Iroha so openly if I could help it.

Iroha: Omg! How am I supposed to experience walking with a boy to school during summer vacation now?!

AKI: Who cares? Walk through the doors.

Iroha: Grrr! You're such a bully, Senpai! Stupid dumb-dumbhead!

I could see Iroha flailing her limbs in a fuss by the school doors. She was probably sticking her tongue out at me, but I was too far away to get a good look.

AKI: It's nine, the time you're supposed to be here. You can't be late; you're an honor student.

Iroha: Hmph! Using my own perfection against me is the worst kind of unfair!

AKI: I'm gonna work in the library as I stalk you. Talk to you later.

Iroha: GRRR! FINE.

It was clear she was still annoyed, but she didn't push it any further. Instead, she turned around and walked into the school building. I waited a while, then followed. Once inside, I changed into my indoor shoes and headed for the library.

Our school's library was open even during the summer break. There was a long table running along the window which had a great view of the building opposite. That was where I sat down. Like the library, the first-year classrooms were on the third floor, making this a prime spot to stalk Iroha.

There was almost no one else here; apparently, this school lacked admirable students who would come in during summer vacation just to read. There was one girl who I didn't recognize, but she seemed to be part of the library committee. I nodded at her when I came in. She stared at me like she was struggling to trust me.

For a split second, I wondered whether Tsukinomori-san had sent her to spy on me, but I quickly shook my head and dismissed the idea. The library committee had a rota for who was going to be on duty, and it would have been decided far before the summer vacation. I didn't know when Tsukinomori-san started suspecting me of seeing other girls, but he didn't come to warn me about it till around halfway through the vacation, so it was probably after the vacation began.

In short, I'd be paranoid to suspect this girl. I could start suspecting her once she'd done something to actually earn it.

I opened up my laptop and got to work. My main goal today was to get some background info on Iroha, but there was bound to be a lot of empty time I didn't want to waste, so I came along with some tasks I could do outside my usual work environment. Actually, since there was no Iroha around to distract me like there was at home, I was confident I could get more done than usual.

I launched my video editing software with the intention of working on Kokuryuuin Kugetsu's release video. She was the character we came up with during our beach vacation at Villa Canaria. With her jet-black outfit, she looked like the ultimate teenage edgelord. Yet there was something in her expression that gave the sense of hidden hyper and annoying tendencies.

"Mm... She's cute. Ah!"

The second I saw the image Murasaki Shikibu-sensei drew for the release, I accidentally said my thoughts out loud. I realized my mistake too late, and when I turned around, I spotted that committee member narrowing her eyes at me.

So here was a guy (me) coming into the library during the summer break, taking out his laptop instead of a book, and staring at this anime girl while muttering about how cute she was. Yeah, that sounded suspicious, all right.

Wait, that wasn't right. I wasn't some nerd who came here to grin openly over 2D girls in a public space! I was just here to stalk Iroha, that's all!

Okay, I get it. Both things are equally sketchy...

I decided to at least keep my mouth shut if I was going to work. I turned back to my laptop when I spotted Iroha on the balcony of the classroom across from me—the classroom that belonged to the first years' advanced class. She wasn't wearing her usual headphones, meaning she was in perfect mode. But she did wave in my direction.

"Hm?"

She was holding her phone in her hand and pointing at it. It was then that I felt my own phone vibrate in my pocket.

What was Iroha calling me for?

"What's up?"

"I thought you could stalk me better if I let you hear what's happening in the classroom, Senpai!"

"Huh?!"

"Leave the call going, okay?"

Was she being serious? Not that it *wouldn't* be helpful to find out more about her relationships...

I watched then as a couple of Iroha's classmates emerged and prodded her in the shoulder.

"You're not slacking, are you?"

"You see your boyfriend or something?"

I could hear a faint second voice through the phone.

"Nope! I was just wondering how much attention we could get if we tried to attract customers from up here!"

"Oh, I get it! Yeah, otherwise people won't know about us until they get to the third floor."

"Yup. So I was thinking we could hang an interesting sign here or something to grab people's attention. If we put a little map to the classroom on it, we should get more people coming to see us."

"Aah! You're so smart, Kohinata-san!"

She one hundred percent just came up with that on the fly. It was an impressive lie to come up with so quickly, at least.

"I've got a Sen— Someone I know comes up with publicity stuff like this every day. I guess you could say his thinking habits transferred to me or something. We don't know if this'll work unless we try it, after all!"

"That's still amazing, though! You're not just booksmart; you're good at practical stuff like this too!"

“Yeah, Kohinata-san! Man, I wish I could be as amazing as you.”

“Aw, quit flattering me, guys! I’m not in any clubs like you guys are, because I spend all my time studying. It’s way more impressive to be good at school and sports!”

“Spend all my time studying my ass!” I paused. “Oops.”

Iroha was being so ridiculous that I couldn’t help but comment out loud. Again, I realized too late, and when I turned around this time, there was fear in the committee member’s eyes as she stared at me.

Now I was a guy who sat in the library reacting to the lively conversations of the girls on the opposite balcony. Not a great look. One more strike and this library girl was probably going to call the cops on me.

Wait, so Iroha talks to her classmates about me like I’m “someone she knows,” huh? I mean, I guess I was just her brother’s friend. It wasn’t like I was disappointed she *wasn’t* talking about me proudly like I was a senpai she really admired.

There was some distance between the two school buildings already, but that distance somehow felt extra long to me; like there was some invisible wall between the buildings which separated two completely different worlds.

“Guess I’ll get back to work...”

Apparently, I’d made my declaration quietly enough that it didn’t bother the committee member. She didn’t glare at me this time.

A little more than two hours passed. While I worked, I learned a lot from watching Iroha prepare for the festival with her classmates.

The first thing I learned was that her classmates really relied on her. There were several girls in the classroom working on sewing together the maid outfits, and others who seemed to be from the art club were making the sign. But whenever any of them ran into a problem, they immediately went to Iroha for help. Iroha was always quick to give them advice, and the girls always responded with surprise and admiration, saying she “really could do anything,” which Iroha replied to by saying she just knew bits and pieces of stuff; in reality, she was no expert, just a jack-of-all-trades.

The second was that she liked to stick her nose in. Even if no one asked for her help, she was always on the ball. When someone was having trouble, she’d go up to them to offer her advice. When someone was being left out, she’d naturally come up with a way to spark conversation.

The third was that the adults trusted her. When their teacher stuck her head in to see what was going on and help out, she had a chat with Iroha. Iroha’s responses were calm and levelheaded, and it

really sounded like they were speaking to each other as equals. It was plain on the teacher's face that she had full faith in Iroha.

"I know I knew this already but...man, she really is an honor student."

I had known it to the extent it was a piece of information in my possession, but I'd never had the chance to observe Iroha among her classmates for a long stretch of time like this. Now that I was, I found myself overcome with admiration, as well as an odd sense of déjà vu that I couldn't explain. Iroha's situation right now was reminding me of something, but...maybe it was just my imagination.

Oh! Right, there was one more thing. Something that *really* caught my attention.

Around an hour after I arrived at the library to commence my stalking—uh, sorry, I meant "working"—someone else had shown up and sat down at the same long table I was on. So, that was about an hour ago now.

She was probably a first-year. Her brown hair was curled smartly at the ends and she looked like your typical outgoing girl. There was no book in front of her. Instead, she glared in a singular direction and muttered to herself.

"Kohinata Iroha. Kohinata Iroha. Kohinata Iroha. I'm gonna expose you today for sure!"

Wait. Wait, what do I do? This is like...bad, right?

I knew it was suspicious enough that I was officially stalking Iroha myself, so I wasn't in a position to say anything. But even I could realize that this girl was...the real deal.

"She's not even cute! O-Okay, so maybe she's *as* cute as me—meerkats, I mean, she's definitely cuter than me...but something about her just rubs me the wrong way!"

This girl was clearly jealous, and she was going about *being* jealous in a super tiring way.

Wait, maybe she's one of Tsukinomori-san's...

I dismissed the thought before I'd even finished it. The vibe was just too weird for that to be true. While I was watching the shameless stalker and trying to work her out, she noticed me staring.

"Huh? Who're you? Some kind of stalker?"

"*You're* the stalker!" I snapped without thinking.

"Wh—" The next second she was seething and her eyebrows were raised incredulously. "How rude! How am *I* the stalker?!"

"You've been staring at Iro—uh, I mean the girl over in that classroom for a while now."



“Huh?! What are you even saying?! I wasn’t looking at Kohinata Iroha! I-I mean, I was, but...I’m not a stalk— Actually, I guess I was stalking her by the dictionary definition, but...”

Her fierce denial shed confidence the more she spoke, and when she got to the end it turned into an outright confession. It’d be nice if at least two of her words in the same sentence conveyed the same emotion and assertion. I can only imagine how hard it’ll be on the animators if they have to switch up her expressions and gestures so many times for a single line. If this were an anime, I mean, but of course, it’s real life.

“Who are you, anyway? You just came and sat down right next to me,” she said.

“I was here first. *You’re* the one who sat by me.”

“Huh?! What are you even saying?! There was no one here!”

“Oh, right... I almost forgot how lacking my presence was...”

It had been a long time since someone far more outgoing than me had commented on not noticing my presence, and it stung. It was easy to forget when I hung out with the Alliance; everyone there—except for Iroha—was the more introverted type, present company included.

“Huh? Oh, sorry. I didn’t mean to insult you.”

“Yeah, I know you didn’t... You were just telling the truth...”

“Man, you are annoying to talk to!” the brown-haired girl cried out in frustration.

Oops. I almost slipped into being the dumb one in the equation. I was supposed to be probing her about her stalking, but it was hard keeping up with sociable people.

“Okay, so how come you’re stalking this ‘Kohinata Iroha’?”

“Don’t call it stalking! She’s in my class, so it’s normal for me to be kinda interested in her, right?”

“You’re in her class? Why aren’t you helping them with the preparations then?”

“It’s not my turn! I was working the whole time Kohinata Iroha was away!”

“Okay, then why did you come to school just to stalk her when you’re not even on duty? That sounds like more than ‘kinda interested’ to me.”

“Shuddup! You’re the one sitting here in the school library with your laptop out during summer break, like a pretentious nerd! You look *at least* as suspicious as I do!”

Sounds like she’s accepted how suspicious she is.

Thinking about it, she’d been pretty open about stalking Iroha this whole time. Maybe she was the type of person who found it impossible to lie—which also made it even less likely that she was an

assassin hired by Tsukinomori-san.

"If you're in that class, that means you're a first-year, right?"

"Hmph. Now you wanna act like a high and mighty senpai?"

"No, that's not it... Hmm..."

I stared at the girl thoughtfully. She had large, expressive eyes; she didn't wear her uniform too strictly, nor too casually; and she seemed to have put thought into every last inch of her appearance. Admittedly, she seemed like a bit of a normie. Despite that, she seemed pretty intelligent.

So maybe she was outgoing, but she still took her studies seriously. She had the looks of someone whose every endeavor was a success, but she seemed intelligent on top of that. She'd probably end up going to one of the top colleges after graduation, but maybe I wasn't a good judge of that kind of thing.

And she already knew about Iroha to some extent... Wouldn't that make her a good Best Friend candidate?

Hm...

"I think you should probably stop stalking her."

"Don't you know how rude it is to just totally ignore the direction the conversation's heading in?!"

Apparently, I spoke my thoughts out loud. The (rejected) candidate for Iroha's friendship was staring at me with tears in her eyes.

"Hmph. The whole senpai-kouhai thing in school is stupid anyway," the girl said. "Being born one year before me doesn't mean squat! You see it all the time in baseball; rookies who are way better players than the pros who're in their second year."

"What's baseball got to do with any of this? You like baseball? But yeah, I guess a single year doesn't make much difference in society's eyes. One year is like a margin of error."

"That's right! I took second place for the entrance exam, the midterms, *and* the end-of-term exams! With amazing grades like that, I bet you won't be able to beat me even if you *are* a year older!"

"Second, huh? That's pretty impressive, actually."

"Y-You think so? Heh... Heh heh! I mean, it was a piece of cake, really!"

She was trying to play it cool, but she couldn't hide her delight. She really was way too honest. I didn't have much experience with types like her, but she seemed kind of like...a sincere show-off.

"Second in your year. Right, I get it now."

"Get what?"

"I just remembered. Iroha—I mean, Kohinata-san—is famous for being top in her year, right?"

"Gnngh..."

“That’s why you’re ‘interested’ in her. I dunno why that means you need to stalk her, though.” I nodded to myself in understanding.

“N-No! You’ve got it all wrong!” The girl leapt to her feet. Her chair clattered to the floor, the sound twice as loud in the silence of the library. “It’s not like I see her as my enemy just because she stole the top spot from me. I mean, it is, but I only feel that way a little bit!”

“So you *do* feel that way? Don’t shout, though. I know it’s the vacation but—”

“This is a library.”

“Yeah, we’re in the library. If you knew, then why did you... Wait, why is your voice different?”

The voice that finished my sentence wasn’t a voice that belonged to Miss Sincere Show-Off. It was a little deeper. If I had to age this new voice, I’d say it was around ten years older than the first one. You might be thinking, “How the hell can a voice have an age?”—it was an expression I sometimes used when doing Iroha’s voice direction. I’d tell her to age her voice up or down a little, for example. Otoi-san taught me all about it.

But yeah, that’s hardly important right now.

Both of us slowly turned in the direction of the voice, to see who this mysterious new third party was. Our movements were similar, but while her face turned dramatically white, mine didn’t.

“Eep...”

“I received a complaint from the library committee. When I came and checked, what should I find but two clamoring monkeys? Perhaps I should send you to the snowy mountains in Nikko to be with your own kind. Once I’ve trained you up to their standards, that is.”

The sincere show-off no longer looked like she wanted to show off; instead, she was now a scared sincere show-off—okay, you know what, I’m just going to say brown-haired girl from now on. The brown-haired girl looked up at the female teacher who was standing there and glaring murderous rage at us.

“K-K-Kageishi-sensei?!” the brown-haired girl cried, looking like she was about to pass out.

Kageishi Sumire, aka the Venomous Queen. A teacher who was both terrifyingly strict and terrifyingly imposing. She was one of the most well-known teachers in the school. Seventy percent of the student population feared her. Twenty-nine percent enjoyed the way she treated them. Less than one percent thought her whiny and pathetic.

Everyone who didn’t know that she was also Murasaki Shikibu-sensei—an illustrator who missed every deadline like it was her religion—was scared of her. It was no wonder that the girl (adding

brown-haired all the time is gonna get annoying too) was frightened.

“What sort of complaint was that?” I asked.

It couldn’t have been a noise complaint. We hadn’t been arguing long enough for that; it would have taken some time for the committee member to go all the way to the staff room and come back. Which could only mean this “complaint” was about...

“The complaint was about a couple of peeping toms spying on a first-year’s classroom.”

“I knew it!”

We were being told off for stalking.

“I didn’t know you were working today, Kageishi-sensei.”

“I am. There are always students who come to school, even during the summer vacation. It is this school’s policy that a minimum of two teachers come in each day. I am on duty today.”

Made sense.

“But I never expected the stalkers to be you two. Tomosaka Sasara-san. I believe you are regarded as a student with a promising future ahead of you.”

The brown-haired girl, who I now knew was called Tomosaka Sasara, whimpered and shrunk back under Sumire’s glare. The air was ripe with anxious anticipation before she spoke again.

“I-I’m sorry for being weird! I’ve got stuff to do, so I’m going home!”

“W-Wait!”

Sasara darted past Sumire and ran out of the library.

“She takes class so seriously, and she’s always doing well in the tests. I thought she was a proper honor student,” Sumire murmured with a sigh, watching her go. “It’s kind of disappointing to see she’s secretly a bit of a creep.”

“You’re one to talk.”

“And look! She just ran away the moment things got tough. That’s just pathetic.”

“I guess that mask you wear is so thick you can’t see past it and into a mirror, huh?”

“Ooboshi-kun. That stalking tip-off concerns you too, you know. There’s gotta be something juicy behind— Ahem. Explain yourself at once.”

For a split second, I caught a glimpse of colorful curiosity within her steely gaze. Right. So she was actually over the moon to be dealing with this, because it meant she didn’t have to sit around in the staff room doing nothing anymore.

“I’m gonna spare you the details, and I promise I have a good reason, but I was just stalking Iroha. That’s all.”

“Uh, okay, I’m definitely gonna need the deets!”

“H-Hey! Teacher mode, okay?”

“Ooh, right! O-Ooboshi-kun! Don’t think you can play word games with me! Explain!”

One elbow prod to the ribs, and Sumire hurriedly readjusted her invisible mask. The library committee member was still here, whether we forgot about her or not. Fortunately, she wasn’t standing that close to us, so she didn’t get to witness Shikibu’s brief appearance.

Sumire glanced at the committee member, then leaned in close to my face and lowered her voice. “It looks to me like you and Iroha-chan are closer than ever. You sure that’s a good idea?”

“What? Why wouldn’t it be?”

“What about Mashiro-chan? You’re supposed to be a couple, right? On the surface, at least. Remember how you told me about that promise you’ve got with Tsukinomori-san back when she transferred here?”

“Oh, right. Yeah, he actually warned us recently about that, so we’ve decided to be more careful.”

“That’s what I mean. What part of stalking Iroha-chan is being ‘careful’?”

“It’s actually kinda related. I wanna find Iroha a best friend.”

I told Sumire what I had told Ozu back on the beach. About how I didn’t want Iroha to lose that one annoying-and-cute part of her when she was left alone after our year graduated. That part of her personality was valuable, and in order to preserve it, I figured the most sensible thing to do would be to find her a friend in her own year. That was why I was doing this background check on her. I also needed to make the relationship between Mashiro and me more convincing to Tsukinomori-san, which was why I was taking the stalking route to do it.

Once I was done explaining, Sumire folded her arms and nodded thoughtfully. “Your thought process is incredibly smart, Aki, but that somehow translates to the dumbest decisions.”

“I-I know that much. I just thought this was the most efficient way...”

“And that thought process led you to pursuing Tomosaka-san. You’re a bad boy, you know that?”

“No, I don’t even know her.”

I only learned her name from our conversation just now. It rang a vague bell, just like Midori’s did for being top in *our* year, but if this Sasaka was second place among the first years, there really wasn’t a reason for me to know her.

“Wait, you mean that was the first time you met? You rolled the gacha and got *her*?”

“Real life doesn’t work like that. But yeah, she sat here and

seemed pretty interested in Iroha.”

“Oh. That makes sense.”

“How come?”

“I’m their math teacher. Tomosaka-san’s always comparing her grade to Iroha-chan when they get a test back.”

“I can see it now...”

“Iroha-chan doesn’t seem to care at all, though. She doesn’t stop smiling whether she’s beaten Tomosaka-san or not.”

“Huh. I thought she’d hate losing.”

She was always setting up those teasing contests with me after all.

“That might only be when it comes to you. She never really tries to one-up anyone, and though she’s top of the class, she doesn’t care that much about it. It’s just where her grades happen to place her.”

“Are we talking about the same Iroha here?”

“Hey, that just means you’re special. The tricky thing about her is that both those sides make up who she really is. Have you noticed when we play mahjong, she’s the only one to discard the tile I need when I’m so obviously sitting there with a hadaka tanki?”

“You could’ve picked a more stirring example than mahjong, but I get what you’re saying.”

In that situation, Ozu and I would tend to play it safe and observe things, rather than make any risky moves. Meanwhile, Iroha would often make some kind of careless move. Maybe it wasn’t so much that she was bad at mahjong, but more because she thought it’d make the game more interesting.

“Only one player can win at mahjong, and Iroha-chan never goes too far out of her way to make it her. I feel like she’s the type to hold herself back to avoid hurting other people’s feelings.”

“Hm. I mean, I know she can be perceptive...”

What was going on in that head of hers?

It was that perceptiveness and her sensitivity to the hearts of others that stopped her from rebelling against her mom’s policies. Maybe that part of her personality was also why she didn’t like to make a big deal of winning.

That might have been why she was such a versatile actress too. What if there were several areas of her life I didn’t know about where she held herself back for other people’s sake? If so, was that what Iroha genuinely wanted?

Hearing what Sumire had to say and observing Iroha in her classroom had made me even surer. Whether it was my business or not, I wanted to find her a friend she could annoy.

Suddenly, Sumire cleared her throat loudly. She’d known me for so long, I bet she had an inkling of what was going through my head.

“Aki, I know you’re just trying to help, but don’t forget about

Mashiro-chan.”

“Wh-What’s Mashiro got to do with this? I haven’t forgotten about her, but this doesn’t concern her.”

Yeah, I was worried for Iroha, but my feelings for her weren’t romantic or anything. I didn’t think so, at least. I hadn’t even told her about Mashiro confessing to me, so I didn’t know why Sumire seemed to be so on the mark. Gimme a break, will you?

“I-I’m just saying, you know what they say about assuming stuff. I’m gonna be facing heartbreak no matter who you choose!”

“Mashiro is my fake girlfriend. Iroha is not my girlfriend of any kind. You’re the one making up some kinda World War III of romance inside your head. You deserve to suffer.”

“Ugh... It sucks not being able to be honest!” Sumire held her head and squirmed.

Even if there were some kind of love triangle going on, Sumire was both our teacher and the adult in the situation, so it’d be unfair for her to take sides. I understood the struggle of being impartial, but I was also kind of impressed how distraught she could get over a mere fantasy.

“So close yet so far... When are you gonna realize the truth, Aki? You sure love keeping me in suspense.”

“Enjoying yourself there, Ozu?”

Chapter 4: My Fake Girlfriend Is Being Intense to Me!

The evening rolled around. Satisfied with the information I'd gathered on Iroha, I sent her a LIME message to let her know I was heading home before making my way back to my apartment. Part of me thought it might be better to walk home with her, but I knew I'd have to keep a good distance behind her like a stalker, so there wasn't much point. As long as I didn't know how Tsukinomori-san might be watching me, I couldn't be too careful.

Oh, and then there was that LIME message Mashiro sent me.

Mashiro: You're not in your room and Iroha-chan's not at home and I tried calling you guys but neither of you picked up so you guys aren't going places behind my back right because I wanna believe you wouldn't cheat on me and go on a date with her right after we decided to act more like a couple to fool dad but if you really are on a date and you like her I wouldn't like it but I'd have to support you guys anyway but sorry I shouldn't have written that I just got kinda excited writing up a plan for our fake date and etc.

Ah, that "etc." was me. There were more than a hundred words of unpunctuated text after that, and most of it was... Well, I don't know, because to be honest, I stopped reading.

A little panicked, I rang Mashiro instead.

"I kinda...hypnotized myself into thinking I was your real girlfriend, and then I kinda got nervous you were cheating on me and then I was writing all that stuff before I knew it. B-But I'm fine! I came back down to earth the second after I sent it. I know you'd never cheat on me, Aki!"

She clearly wasn't fine now, or she wouldn't still be talking about non-fake-girlfriend stuff like cheating.

I came back to my apartment anyway, because I wanted to talk about our fake date plan with Mashiro. I wanted to come up with something that would get Iroha a best friend and do something about Tsukinomori-san at the same time.

I sent Mashiro another message when I got back to my room. I thought we'd be having the meeting in Mashiro's room, but she told me that was "impossible," so now we were meeting here. If she thought she was my real girlfriend, then I didn't see why she wouldn't let me in her apartment, but I guess this was one of those complicated girl things I'd never understand for as long as I lived.

"H-Hello..."

"Hi."

Mashiro showed up at my apartment ten seconds after the "read" icon appeared on my message. She fidgeted awkwardly as she sat down in my living room, and I went to make her some coffee.

"Milk and sugar?"

"None. Black."

"Huh. You used to have both. I guess you've grown up."

"D-Don't tease me. And don't talk about when we were kids."

"Sorry, sorry." I grinned sheepishly as I placed the cup down in front of her.

Mashiro looked so much like she always did that it was hard to believe she'd sent me that crazy LIME message. She was an aspiring author, so maybe she found it way easier to (over-)express herself through text.

She really has grown up... I thought as I gently gazed at her while she sipped at her black coffee.

She was wearing a cool-looking sleeveless dress. I could just about see the remains of her makeup on her face and lips, and her fingernails were perfectly trimmed. She really took care of her appearance, right down to the last detail.

I thought back to my conversation with Otoi-san that morning. Now that I looked, it was striking just how mature Mashiro was. She looked so perfect, even though she was just coming to the apartment next door. Maybe it was because she loved me, or maybe it had nothing to do with that and she worked hard on her physical appearance because of her low self-esteem.

"Wh-What are you staring at? You know that's rude, don't you?"

"S-Sorry. I just ended up staring after realizing how pretty you've gotten."

"Wh-Wh-What— How?!" Mashiro's pale face turned bright red.

Dammit, why did I say that? What was I thinking, not even bothering to filter my thoughts? We were living in a time where just talking to a passing high school girl counted as sexual harassment, and here I was, saying this stuff to a girl who I *knew* had feelings for me. I needed to rein in the casual compliments.

"S-Sorry. I didn't mean anything by it."

"Don't flirt without thinking. Or you might end up without your

body on a nice boat.”

“Sounds like that anime they marathon every Christmas. But yeah, I’m really sorry.”

“Well. As long as you mean it.”

Whew, she forgave me.

“I don’t mind being called pretty. But if you get my hopes up too much, I’m just gonna get depressed later. So try not to make me too happy.”

“R-Right. I’ll be careful.”

“Okay. But still praise me sometimes.”

“I can still praise you?”

“Yeah, but I’ll get mad. Tell you not to flirt without thinking. But I still want you to praise me.”

“Sounds kinda confusing...”

“As long as you praise me and then don’t disappoint me afterwards, you’ll be fine.”

“That’s unfair. But I guess there’s nothing I can do about it if there’s no right answer...”

For Mashiro, the best-case scenario was not only getting praised by me, but us becoming a real couple on top of that. That was what she was after, so anything I did that fell short of that would make her mad, of course.

More than anything, I was surprised that she was able to stand up for herself so openly, given how shy she used to be in the years I’d known her.

“Okay, I get it. I mean, I’ve been blessed with the honor of fake dating you, so I guess I can let a little unreasonableness slide.”

Mashiro giggled. “Aw, Aki. I love that about you.”

“R-Right.”

The sudden L-word sent a jolt through my chest. If she wanted me to have a heart attack, she was going about it the right way.

“Okay, let’s get down to business,” she said.

“S-Sure.”

“First, I want you to read this.”

Thunk. Mashiro dropped a thick mountain of text-crammed A4 papers on the table in front of us.

“What’s this?” I wasn’t sure I wanted to know.

“Our date plan.”

“Maybe I’m just imagining things, but it seems kinda...thick. How many pages is it?”

“Two hundred and forty.”

“Same length as a novel. Got it.”

Two hundred and forty pages for a plan? Who has the patience to read all that?

“Oh, but the first hundred and twenty pages are more of an introduction.”

“Why do we need an introduction to a date plan?”

“You get them in tabletop role-playing games and murder mysteries, right? We’re each playing a role, so we need to make sure we have the same detailed background knowledge and fully comprehend the prerequisites. Obviously.”

“I know you wanna be a writer, but you mind not using your wordsmithery to try and convince me of your crazy theories?”

Makigai Namako-sensei did the same thing sometimes. I guess writers were alike, whether pro or amateur. I almost just said yes without questioning it too, making it a pretty dangerous skill.

“Just show me the part that talks about the actual plan.”

“Hmph. You won’t be able to sympathize with the characters properly if you don’t read the introduction. But fine. Start reading from page one hundred and forty-eight.”

“That’s still half... Okay, let’s see here.”

“The Sharktopus Samurai held the cuddly object to her chest and smiled like she was being treated to a jellyfish dinner!”

“None of these words belong together. What are you making me read?”

“Oh, sorry, wrong page. I meant a hundred and eighty-four, not forty-eight. I got a bit carried away there and started writing a side story for one of the minor characters.”

“Why is there a ‘minor character’ in a date plan? Who is this Sharktopus Samurai, and how exactly is this jellyfish being served?”

“I haven’t got the name down yet, so that’s a placeholder for now. I’ll change it later.”

“What about this cuddly object then?”

“See, I know where I wanna go with that, but I haven’t figured out all the details yet.”

“Right. Character names and details like that should be left till last, and you should work on getting the general text down first. Sounds like a pretty efficient method to me.”

“See?” Mashiro let out a triumphant giggle.

“Yup. It’s a pretty efficient method. If you’re writing a novel, not a date plan.”

“D-Don’t worry about that. I swear the main story starts from page one hundred and eighty-four.”

A main story. In a date plan. What?

She told me not to worry, but it was with an anxious mind that I settled down and began to read the pages she’d set for me.

I never liked festivals.

They were too crowded, which made walking difficult. Among all those pretty girls in their yukatas, there was me. I was wearing one too. Or more like, it was wearing me; I never felt like yukatas suited me and it made me self-conscious.

People laughed at me when my scoop broke straight away during goldfish scooping. I couldn't shoot anything at the shooting gallery, so that was boring. The water balloons would always split and soak me.

I had to admit, though, the dashi they used to cook the Kansai-style takoyaki made them taste pretty good.

There were fireworks. I could always hear them explode, but I never saw their colors or patterns. The applause they received and the happy gasps from the crowds made me think they were probably beautiful.

Those were the memories I associated with summer festivals. Going was a waste of time most years. But this year was different. This year was special. I'm special this year. And you're special this year.

I never used to like festivals, but with you, I'm sure this can be the start of the best summer of my life.

"Hmm. I see."

So it was some kind of poem, and not a novel?

"What it means is, let's go to the summer festival at the end of the month."

"If you can sum it up in a single sentence, why'd you write two hundred and forty whole pages?"

"Stop making fun of me. There's a detailed plan for the actual day in there too. Pages two hundred and thirty-nine through two hundred and forty."

"Only two pages?!"

So the "detailed" part of the plan was only two pages long. Why didn't she just bring me two pages then?

I got where she was coming from when she said it was important to know the characters' background and history to role-play their relationship properly, but there was such a thing as going overboard.

"Anyway. The summer festival, huh?"

"What, is there something wrong with that?"

"No, not at all. I was just thinking that it's not like you to want to go to a festival."

"I don't want to go. *You* wanted to go, idiot."

"Huh?"

"Never mind. You're too dense a protagonist. Go die in a fire."

"I just said 'huh' because I wanted you to repeat what you said. That's not enough to label me a dense protagonist."

"Getting indignant about it is gross. I'm done." After her scathing abuse, Mashiro scowled and turned away from me. Then she glanced

in my direction. "Or did you want to go with Iroha-chan?"

"She invited me, yeah."

"What?"

"Ah, it wasn't like it was a serious invitation. More like it fit into the plans we already had, that's all."

I had to be vague, because I couldn't tell Mashiro about our recording session that day.

"Your plans with...Iroha-chan."

"Don't worry. I'm not gonna do anything that'll make your dad suspicious. I'm probably gonna turn her down anyway."

"Huh. So you wanna go with me to the summer festival instead of with Iroha-chan?"

"That sounds like a loaded question. It's more that I want Iroha to get closer to her classmates."

"Oh, right. I get it. Unlike me, she's got a lot of friends."

"And if I'm not mistaken, that's an even more loaded statement."

"And anyway, I think... I mean, I know Iroha-chan comes into your room like all the time, and even if it's routine, that doesn't make it right... If I'm being nice, I guess it's fine and all since she's been doing it forever... But then inviting you to a summer festival on top of that is pretty rude..." Mashiro grumbled and puffed up her cheeks. "Because she's making a move on my crush."

"Um, you know Iroha doesn't know you confessed to me, right?"

"My confession?! Aki, I'm going out with you! I like Iroha-chan for sure, but I don't think it's right to invite a guy out somewhere when he's already got a girlfriend."

"We're not going out for real, though. It's an act. And yeah, I know you like me, and that makes me happy and all, but I feel bad calling Iroha inconsiderate for inviting me to the festival."

"Aki? What are you saying?"

"Huh? What do you mean, what am I saying?"

Mashiro was frowning at me suspiciously with her head tipped to one side. Perturbed, I tilted my head at the exact same angle.

Did I do something wrong?

I felt like we were acting on some very separate, very fundamental assumptions somehow.

"Iroha-chan doesn't know that our relationship is fake. As far as she knows, I'm your real girlfriend, and that's why she should be behaving like you're taken."

Wait.

What?

"So you're saying, since Iroha doesn't know we're faking it, she must think we're a genuine couple?"

I knew my reply made me sound like a disgraced politician, but I

really needed to get my thoughts in order properly here. I felt like I'd never be able to understand what Mashiro was saying right now otherwise.

Mashiro nodded. "That's right. Iroha thinks you're in a relationship, and yet she invited you on a date. I think that's rude. Don't you?"

"Right. I guess if she thinks we're really a couple, then asking me out would be like trying to steal another girl's man."

"That's right! So—"

"Wait a sec."

Mashiro sounded like she was about to give me another info dump, so I interrupted her. But I could see where she was coming from. If Mashiro and I etc. then Iroha would etc. etc. Her argument made perfect sense, 5/7, would again.

But there was a hole.

"Iroha knows our relationship is fake, though, right?"

"Huh?"

"W-Wait. You didn't *know* she knows?"

"I didn't... Does that mean you told Iroha-chan? You told her we weren't really dating?"

"It's not really like that. It's more...I just thought it was fine to tell the Alliance. I mean, the people we know who live on this floor..."

Now we were in trouble. My fake relationship with Mashiro affected the whole Alliance's future, so I thought it was right to tell them about it. It was a values thing for me, so it never even crossed my mind to keep it a secret.

As for Iroha being behind the Phantom Voice Troupe, that was an exception. That was a huge secret I couldn't share no matter my values.

I couldn't believe that Mashiro had gone all this time thinking that the Alliance thought we were actually going out. Now that I thought about it, the relationship between me, Mashiro, and the Alliance was pretty complicated. I just hadn't noticed before because of all the other stuff going on.

"Wh-What the hell?! Does that mean everyone knew I was just pretending to be your girlfriend whenever I met with them? Unngh... That's way too embarrassing. I just wanna die now!"

"Calm down, Mashiro. You didn't even do anything that girlfriend-like. In fact, you've been acting pretty cold to me in front of everyone else, like you always do!"

"What about when I came out to Sumire-sensei so confidently?! D-Does that mean she knew we weren't really dating then as well? You know, I thought her reaction was pretty weak compared to the other thing I told her!"

“Sumire-sensei? What are you talking about?”

“Aaarrgh! I’ll get you for this, Shikibu!”

She was saying some pretty weird stuff, but she seemed to be in too much of a state of confusion to answer any of my questions.

“And the reason Iroha-chan’s been so clingy with you without worrying about me is because she *knew* our relationship was fake?! Aaarrgh!”

Mashiro’s face was redder than a boiling lobster as she held her head and curled up in on herself. I didn’t know what there was to be jealous of. All Iroha ever did was bully me.

...Is what I would’ve said in the past. But now that I’d come up with my new theory, that Iroha was objectively cute when she was pestering me, I could easily see why Mashiro might see her as a romantic threat.

“I’m... I’m sorry. I didn’t realize. Sorry for being an insensitive jerk.”

“I-It’s fine. It’s my fault too, for not realizing that’s just how you are.”

“No, I’ve been too careless about this whole thing from the start. I’ve been mixing up so many secrets I’m losing track of who knows what.”

“Mixing up secrets?” Mashiro sat up suddenly. She paused as though mulling the word over and considering what she should say next. “Have you got...more secrets? Secrets like the one about us fake dating?”

“Huh? Oh, no, it was a figure of speech, or I mean...”

“Oh. But there are some secrets you’re keeping from everyone, aren’t there? Like about the...Phantom Voice Troupe...”

She played her card timidly, but it had a more powerful effect than I could ever have imagined. To put it in TCG terms, she just activated her trap card and destroyed my entire strategy.

How many people are actually going to get what that means? At least I got all the TCG fans biting their nails.

I smiled at her as inoffensively as I could. “R-Right! I guess you could call that a secret. Not a very interesting one, though. I just can’t say anything because of the contracts I’ve got with our voice actors.”

I wasn’t lying. I hadn’t *signed* anything with Iroha, but from a legal perspective, a verbal agreement was still a contract. Right?

“Hmm... Really? Hmm...”

“Wh-What? If there’s something you wanna say, say it.”

“N-No. It’s nothing.”

“O-Oh. Good.”

It was just heart attack after heart attack with this girl. She must’ve taken three years off my life at this point.

I studied Mashiro's face, wondering whether she might know that Iroha was the Phantom Voice Troop, but I couldn't pick up anything because she was too busy staring at the floor.

"I won't lose," Mashiro mumbled after a long silence.

"Huh?"

I didn't catch what she said, and though I pressed her to repeat it once more for her audience as any good protagonist should, she didn't.

Mashiro shoved her thick novel—sorry, date plan—in my chest, almost scowling as she said, "Summer festival."

"Can I at least sort out my plans on that day? Then I can let you know."

"You're coming. You don't get the right to refuse."

"R-Right. I'll figure something out."

The recording session was on that day, but I'd been recording with Iroha for months now, so I could more or less guess how long it would take. Scheduling an event for afterwards shouldn't be too dangerous. I was planning to head to the festival anyway so I could keep an eye on how Iroha was getting on with forming those wholesome same-sex friendships. What could be more efficient than combining that with a fake date with Mashiro?

"Okay. We're going together then."

"Sure. I don't have to dress up or anything, right?"

In the fun world of normies, summer festivals meant cute and colorful yukatas. But introverts hated that kind of stuff, and Mashiro was one of them. I was sure she wouldn't want us to dress up.

"Normie culture sucks! I just wanna tear up all those stupid yukatas and throw them away! People only wear them because of peer pressure!"

I could imagine Mashiro spitting out all these spiteful words, and more.

"Are you stupid or something?"

My naivety earned me a crushing insult.

"We'll rent yukatas," Mashiro continued. "Obviously."

"Seriously? I thought you wouldn't want to wear the same stuff as all those outgoing types..."

"I hate those kinds of people, who over-accessorize and stuff. But I think yukatas are a beautiful part of Japanese culture. Traditions are important!" Mashiro rattled off, excited.

Oh, right. Come to think of it, otaku are pretty big on honoring culture and tradition.

"It's a festival, so you have to wear a yukata. You can't wear anything else. There's a rental place near the station. Go there and rent something before our date."

If it was near the station, it wouldn't be too far from Otoi-san's

place either.

“Got it. Wonder how much it’ll cost. Hopefully the Alliance’s budget can cover it...”

“Don’t worry. I’ll pay.”

“Huh? I can’t let you do that. If the budget doesn’t cover it, I can pay with my own money. It’s better than making you pay.”

“It’s okay. I’m pretty rich.”

“Seriously? Well, I guess that makes sense, considering your dad’s a CEO. He might be kinda crazy, but as long as he gives you a good allowance...”

“Don’t tease. I don’t sponge off my dad; I make my own money.”

“Wow, it’s great to hear that you’re—wait, you don’t have a job, right?”

“Oh. U-Um, not exactly!” Mashiro quickly put her hands over her mouth. Her face changed color faster than a blinking traffic light, and her eyes darted this way and that. “I-I just came across a lot of money. Don’t ask questions.”

“Sounds like something a criminal would say.”

“Y-You’re jumping to conclusions! There are tons of good part-time jobs out there!”

“For example?”

“L-Like drug trials?”

“Why are you saying it like it’s a question?”

“By the way, one of Canary-san’s programs for when you’re running behind on your deadlines involves clinical trials. Because they make you stay in the hospital after taking the drug, you can make really good progress on your manuscript.”

“Mind not suddenly taking the conversation in dark directions?”

“L-Look, it doesn’t matter where my money comes from, okay? It’s rude to go sniffing out a girl’s secrets.”

The way she was desperately trying to change the subject was way too suspicious. She was that one character in every mystery novel that everyone thinks is the criminal right from the start. That one merchant in every fantasy film that betrays their homeland in the second half. That one wife in every adult manga who ends up having sex with the guy she’s *not* married to.

My point being, something was up, but I knew Mashiro well enough to know she probably wasn’t getting her money from anything sketchy. These days, high school girls could get paid to date older men, or they could find themselves a sugar daddy, so the chances of Mashiro getting into that weren’t *zero*, but she was so shy that I doubt she’d have the confidence to meet up with a stranger like that. Then again, it was the quieter girls who were surprisingly more vulnerable to that sort of thing, right?

Okay, I'm gonna stop now. I've known Mashiro since we were young; I didn't want to start imagining her in those kinds of situations.

Unaware of the guilt I was feeling from thinking about her sinking into the underbelly of society, Mashiro suddenly leaped up from her chair.

"I'm taking responsibility for this date. I'm not gonna let you pay a penny!"

"Mashiro..."

"I'll show you that I'm perfectly capable of taking the lead, and I'm gonna use every weapon I have to do it! Bye!"

With that final, almost aggressive remark, Mashiro left the room, leaving me alone with the...two-hundred-and-forty-page date plan/novel she'd foisted on me, the schedule for the summer festival that she was forcing me to stick to, and a vague sense that something was...off.

"Is it just me, or was Mashiro acting weird?"

Mashiro had become more assertive after confessing to me, but she'd never acted this forceful. Maybe she'd had some kind of change of heart? I wasn't sure. But worrying about something I wouldn't understand wasn't going to solve anything. There was no bigger waste of time than being trapped by a problem with no answer. It was sheer stupidity.

"I just gotta do what I can for now."

I tapped out a message to Iroha on my phone.

AKI: I'm going with Mashiro to the summer festival, but I want to explain why. Come over tonight.

Iroha: Huh?

"I'm not asking you to just accept this, okay?!"

"You're on your knees already?!"

When Iroha came into my bedroom that evening, I greeted her in a traditional and polite Japanese style.

She must have just come back from helping out for the school festival, because she was in uniform. The long legs stretching down from her skirt had socks on them, even though she usually took them off when she came to my place. I was so quick in bowing down before her that she wouldn't have had the time to take them off yet.

"I'm fully aware that you invited me first. I know this isn't a great time to be focusing everything on the Alliance and my relationship with Mashiro. But this is really important."

Tsukinomori-san suspected that I was getting close to another girl

(that girl being Iroha). If I didn't fully commit myself to playing Mashiro's fake boyfriend, I wouldn't be fulfilling my end of the contract with him. Also, that two-hundred-and-forty-page date plan was way too heavy.

That last part would end up as a joke no matter how seriously I tried to explain it.

"...And that's why I'm going with Mashiro to the summer festival. I'm sorry, but if you went with your school friends instead, it'd be the most efficient way to move things along..."

"I get it, but— Whoa, this is huge."

When I finished speaking, Iroha picked up Mashiro's date plan that was on the floor next to me. She stared at it in exasperation. She then took off her shoes and flopped back on my bed, holding up the plan and reading it in the same pose she often does while reading manga on my bed. The sigh she let out was half exasperated, and half sympathetic.

"Mashiro-senpai's love for you is really deep, huh?"

"Two-hundred-and-forty pages deep."

"The way you approach things so seriously makes you a die-hard ifrit too."

"I don't know what any of that means."

"Well, die-hard is like, stubborn, yeah? And ifrit is a fiery demon of death, which means that your heart burns with passion! All the teenagers are using that word these days."

"Seriously? I didn't know."

I was a teenager too. I guess it just went to show how far removed my life was from that of your average teenage girl's.

"I just came up with that on the spot, by the way."

"You were kidding?!"

I was just about to start getting depressed about not having heard that word before. Not that I planned to suddenly start getting involved with inefficient teenage things. Despite my beliefs in life, failing to keep up with society's pace was invariably a bad thing. I needed to keep a feeler out for the general values our society worked on to make sure the product my team created would appeal to as many people as possible. As long as I could keep up, we were good.

"Hm... Mashiro-senpai..." Iroha shifted herself up on the bed so her back was leaning against the wall, pulled her knees up, and buried her face in them. "Y'know, I was looking forward to thinking about how I could get on your nerves while we watched the fireworks."

"Mm. I-I'm sorry. I don't really know what to say..."

"I wanted to top off the last days of the summer vacation with you, Senpai. Just enjoying our youth and making some memories."

She sounded so despondent. Needles of guilt pricked at my chest.

I didn't know how Iroha really felt. I didn't think her feelings were romantic. But I knew that she cared about me a great deal. Of course she was disappointed.

"I'm... I'm sorry. Like I said, I'm not expecting you to just accept this. I'll make it up to you somehow. Any way you want me to. So please don't be—"

"Any way I want, huh?"

"What?"

"You said it, not me! You're sorry, and you'll do anything to make it up to me!"

"Any way you want' doesn't mean... Okay, I guess it does. Yeah, I did say that..."

"Ha ha! Anything, huh? I'm gonna think of the most unreasonable request *ever*!"

"Please be kind."

"Don't worry! I'll set the request difficulty to 'Cirque du Soleil'!"

"That's a groundbreaking circus company."

"Right, I'm so nice that I'm not setting the level any higher! You should be grateful!"

"Uh... Thanks?"

In reality, I just told a friend I couldn't accept her invitation anymore because I was going on a date with my girlfriend instead. Honestly, that was a pretty shitty thing to do when the friend had asked first, so I deserved what I got. As long as her request didn't get *too* unreasonable, it was fair enough. Although, knowing Iroha...

"I'll cash in on that favor later, so you just go out and have fun with Mashiro-senpai."

"Okay. What are you gonna do?"

"Don't worry, I'll go with my class! I know what you're thinking, but I'm actually pretty popular! Unlike you, who's got eternally zero friends! I'll show you just how different we are, Senpai!" Iroha grinned and shot me a thumbs-up.

Part of me was annoyed that she could barely go a single sentence without insulting me, but I was mostly relieved by her enthusiasm. Hopefully, this would all lead to her finding a friend she could be full-on annoying with.

"Ahem. Now it's time to sort out our schedule for the day of the summer festival." I coughed and rearranged my features into something more serious. It was time to put away the pathetic side of me that was my private life, and put my amateur producer mask back on, which had been seeing a lot of use recently. "We'll do the recording at Otoi-san's house in the afternoon. In the evening, I'll enjoy the festival with Mashiro, and you go have fun with your classmates. Got it?"

“Yes, sir, Mr. Producer!”

“Don’t call me that. People’ll think I’m the wrong kind of producer.”

“Tsukinomori-san’s getting more aggressive, is she? This sounds kinda bad...”

“Wait, I feel like I haven’t spoken to you like this in a while. What have you been doing recently and where?”

“There’s a new popular dating sim that’s out, so I’ve been locking myself up to complete it.”

“Oh, cool. What’s it called?”

“Hating*Lovers.”

“Sounds like the kinda game where the girls bully you.”

Interlude: Iroha's Gloom

“Senpai’s such a stupid idiot dumbface!”

It was night, and all my lights were still on. I was there on the bed, letting my overflowing emotions out. I was flailing my limbs like a grade schooler, and squishing and pulling at Tomaty-kun’s face (he’s my stuffed tomato).

Usually I found his smug expression cute, but today it was super getting on my nerves! It was like he was staring at me and saying: “Yeah, I know I’m adorable, so what?”

I knew I was just taking out my anger on him, though. Sorry, Tomaty-kun.

“I guess I really am selfish...”

It had been a few days since that day on the beach. There was that weird ceremony, and then Senpai and I had that long chat on the beach, which ended up with me being able to finally work with the 05th Floor Alliance and not have to hide it. That was a lot of progress for me.

It also felt like Senpai and I had gotten closer. Thinking back to it now made my heart pound, my skin sweat even more than was normal for a humid summer night like this.

Senpai was determined to pour everything he had in his direction of the Alliance until we reached our goal. He rejected everything to do with romance and youth. I already knew that was what he’d decided, and to expect anything more from him was just setting myself up for disappointment.

I knew the jealousy I was feeling right now was dumb. I knew it was selfish and gross.

He had to prioritize his date with Mashiro-senpai for the Alliance’s sake. The only thing reassuring me right now, and the thing I was holding on to so desperately, was that Senpai probably didn’t have feelings for her.

Even then, I couldn’t stop. There was nothing logical thinking could do to stop me feeling this way.

I guess this was my punishment.

When Mashiro-senpai had asked me about my true feelings, I had lied to her in the spur of the moment. I hid my heart underneath my sleeve, even when I knew she’d already confessed to Senpai properly. Then I took advantage of Senpai’s worldview to do nothing and ignore

the reality that we were going to have to fight for his affection.

If I really loved Senpai, and if I really wanted to be more than just his kouhai or his friend's little sister, I couldn't avoid a confrontation with Mashiro-senpai. That was the unquestionable truth. And I tried to ignore it.

She was delicate, cute, and always put in as much effort as she could in her devotion to Senpai. She was such a great girl that I couldn't bring myself to hate her, even if she was my love rival. In some ways, that made her the worst kind of enemy I could have.

The old me would have given up. I always used to do what mom said—because I didn't want to see her sad—and turned away from all kinds of entertainment, pretending I had no interest at all in acting...when the opposite was true.

Then I met Senpai, and now I knew how important it was not to give up and to keep chasing what you love.

I didn't want to give up. That determination had taken root deep, deep inside my heart. There was a simple reason, even with that determination, why I wasn't able to just come clean to Mashiro-senpai about my feelings.

"I'm such a coward..."

In the end, I was too scared. I was scared that Mashiro-senpai would hate me, and I didn't know whether Senpai would accept my feelings either. If only I had the courage to be hated. If only I wasn't scared of getting hurt. Then I might not be feeling this low right now.

"Nngh! Stop it! Getting depressed won't solve anything! You gotta stay positive, Iroha-chan!"

I bonked myself lightly on the head to get my feelings back in gear and then picked up the bundle of papers by my pillow. It was the script for the recording, packed with the lines of *Koyagi*'s new character, Kokuryuuin Kugetsu, who was born from our time at Kiraboshi Kanaria (or Canary)'s villa. She was the idol who edited Makigai-sensei's and Mashiro's works.

I'd read it so many times that the paper was creased, and there were notes on each line marked in red. That was proof of how much work I'd put into this.

My thoughts were all over the place, but I at least wanted to give my all to the stuff I could actually work on right now. As long as Senpai was giving everything to the Alliance, I wanted to give everything to him and the Alliance too.

"I'm gonna blow you guys away! Senpai! Otoi-san! I hope you're ready for me!"

I made my declaration of war to the empty room, and then I sank deep down into Kokuryuuin Kugetsu's soul.

Interlude: Namako and Shikibu

At night, karaoke was filled with the grating voices of the demons known as extroverts. I knew that, and that walking out alone at eleven in the evening as a high schooler was morally dubious, but I had a good reason for coming to karaoke at this time.

“M-Mashiro-chan? As your teacher, I’m not sure about you doing karaoke this late.”

“You’re my guardian in this situation, so it’s fine.”

“I-I know, but... If that’s the case, I hope you’ll treat me with the respect a guardian deserves,” a sweaty Sumire-sensei whined.

No, not Sumire-sensei. Shikibu.

I was livid. I wasn’t about to acknowledge her as someone to be revered. And I called her here for one reason alone.

I sat down on one of the deep couches and crossed my legs.

“When I told you that Aki and I weren’t really dating, why didn’t you tell me you already knew?” I growled threateningly into the mic. Actually, it sounded more like a weird howl, which was kind of embarrassing, but I didn’t care at that point. “If I knew everyone in the Alliance knew about us, I could have changed my plan of attack!”

“I-I couldn’t help it! I was so surprised to find out you were Makigai Namako-sensei that the ‘I’m not really dating Aki’ thing didn’t really register, because I already knew about it!”

“So it’s an argument you want, is it?”

“I’m sorry! I mean it! It was all my fault! I’ll do anything! Please don’t get mad!” Shikibu wailed, throwing herself at my feet and clinging to my leg.

Why is she acting like she’s used to this?

There was pathetic, and then there was this. But that was precisely why I was overcome with the motherly desire to forgive her. Shikibu had obviously maxed out her skill points in “begging for her life.” This was probably how she acted when Aki poured on the pressure too.

I sighed. “Fine. I’ll forgive you. But I want information.”

“Information?”



“Information on Iroha-chan. What do you know about her, Shikibu?”

“What do I know?”

“Don’t lie to me. Don’t try to cover anything up either.”

“I-I know!” Her eyes still filled with tears, Shikibu began to think. “Um, um... Nothing’s really coming to me about Iroha-chan, uh... She likes tomato juice.”

“I don’t care about what she likes... Wait, Iroha-chan likes tomato juice too?”

Just like me.

Aki used to like it and drink it a lot, which was how I got to drinking it. At first, I found it too sour, but I didn’t want to not drink it when Aki could, so I kept at it. Eventually I realized I’d developed a taste for it.

I wonder if Iroha-chan also drinks it because of him?

I had more important questions than that, though.

The Phantom Voice Troupe. I needed to know if I was the only one who knew that “they” were Iroha-chan. Whether everyone on the fifth floor of the apartment building knew, and whether Makigai Namako didn’t because he was too far removed.

I needed to know, because it would influence my angle of attack.

“Why is she always with Aki when she’s not even in the Alliance?”

“Huh?”

Shikibu blinked at me. It appeared she hadn’t been expecting my question. Her surprise meant she was inno— No, I couldn’t be sure yet. I didn’t want to be left embarrassed by a lack of information again.

“Don’t you think it’s strange? Aki’s priority has always been the Alliance and its activities. He’s supposed to be all about efficiency, so it doesn’t make any sense that he lets Iroha-chan sneak into his room all the time.”

“Um... I guess?”

“I’m gonna throw something at you. It’s just a hypothesis, okay?”

“Okay.”

I had to be very careful not to accidentally leak any information as I probed. I needed to be indirect and casual, making full use of the extensive vocabulary that was afforded to me by my profession as an author.

“What if Iroha-chan’s an Alliance member herself?”

Sorry. I kind of ended up saying exactly what I was thinking. I knew in my head that I should have been indirect, but I couldn’t hold back against my desire to discover the truth.

It wouldn’t be long until the summer festival. I’d already decided

in my heart that I wanted to get stronger, whether Iroha-chan was the Alliance's voice actress or not. But the strength of my enemy would be vastly different depending on how many of the Alliance members knew about Iroha-chan's secret. For example, if Shikibu knew the truth...

"Iroha-chan? An Alliance member? Hmm. I know she was helping Aki out when we went to the beach, but I haven't heard about her being assistant producer or anything like that..." Shikibu pressed a finger to her jaw and tilted her head as a question mark appeared above it.

Goofy as her reaction was, it seemed genuine.

"You really don't know anything?"

"About what? Wait, is there something—"

"No, nothing. I just wanted to know how close my rival is to Aki." I quickly looked away before she could turn the tables and start asking questions of *me*.

I knew my behavior was unnatural, but Shikibu didn't notice. In fact, she took it to mean something else. A mischievous grin rose to her lips.

"You're jealous, right? That's why you're asking all these questions."

"K-Kind of. Wh-Why do you look so happy?"

"Well, till recently, I thought Makigai Namako-sensei was a guy. And even though it's really you, I'm still playing all these yaoi Aki x Namako scenes in my head."

"Wh-What the heck! Imagine us as a boy and a girl!"

Was it normal to just gender-swap people in your head like that? Clearly, Shikibu was so entrenched in her outrageous fantasies that she was starting to lose her grip on common sense. Wait. Why did I just imagine an image of a black pot? Must've been one of those weird intrusive thoughts.

Because I could tell the difference between fantasy and reality perfectly fine.

"But anyway. I guess you don't know anything..."

Unless the LIME messages I saw were wrong, there was no doubt that Iroha-chan was the Alliance's voice actor. But if neither Makigai Namako nor Shikibu knew about it, that made Iroha-chan...special.

I could feel a heavy gloom settling in my chest. I would've felt better if Shikibu had known the truth. Because that would mean Aki was treating her secret like mine, as one that he could share with everybody. It would make Iroha-chan and me equal.

But that wasn't the case. Aki hadn't told anyone who Iroha-chan really was. That was how special she was to him.

"Mashiro-chan?"

“Hm?”

Shikibu was looking up at me from the floor with anxiety in her eyes. I realized then that I’d been getting lost in my thoughts.

“Are you okay? You were looking a little...terrifying.”

“I’m fine. I think my Karma Meter just went down a little.”

“Wait, that’s bad!” Shikibu cried, but quickly rearranged her features into something more serious. “Hey, Mashiro-chan...”

Seeing her wearing such a grave expression while she was kneeling at my feet was close to making me laugh, but it was kind of awkward to ask her to stop, so I just let her continue.

“To be honest, I don’t like meddling in other people’s love lives.”

“Which is why you focus on shipping instead.”

“Yeah. But, as your friend, I really want both you and Iroha-chan to be happy.”

“Does that mean you can’t root for me?”

“No, I *am* rooting for you. I don’t want to do anything that’ll blatantly get in Iroha-chan’s way, but I want to do small things to support you where I can.”

“Oh. But thanks. That’s reassuring enough by itself.”

Given Shikibu’s tricky position in this whole thing, I should be grateful that she was even going that far. I couldn’t let myself get greedy.

“Could you tell me something then, on top of that support? From your perspective...what kind of person do you think Aki would fall in love with?”

“Aki? Hmm, that’s a toughie. He doesn’t love me, never has. I can tell you that much. I’ve annoyed him, and he probably hates me at times, but... Wait.” A light bulb seemed to go off in her head. “Maybe he’d fall in love with you if you did the opposite of the stuff that makes him hate me.”

“The opposite?”

“Yeah. Whenever I whine or run away from him because I missed a deadline, Aki gets red-hot mad. I mean he looks at me like I’m trash. That just might be me being paranoid, of course.”

“That’d make anyone mad, especially when you’re missing your deadlines because you wanna watch anime instead.”

“Quit it with the logic and reason!”

“Stop acting like a kid. Hmm. But, I guess it sort of makes sense...”

Shikibu sounded like she was spouting nonsense, but there actually might have been a nugget of truth in her words. Aki was really hardworking and positive. He probably had a lot of weaknesses, but he worked hard to overcome them so that they didn’t come to the forefront and he could keep moving forward.

I didn’t want to be weak anymore either. That was why I made

that date plan all by myself, and wanted to take the lead with the whole thing.

But it wasn't enough. It was just another means of escape, albeit a more positive one. I was trying something new so that I could ignore my weakness.

What would Aki do? What kind of girl would he resonate with and allow to stand by his side?

"Right... That's what I should have done..."

"La la la! Not listening! Not listen— Huh? What did you just say?"

"I was just saying I'm glad you're a chronic procrastinator. Thank you."

"Um. You're welcome?"

I nodded back at her. "Since we're here anyway, why don't we do some singing?"

Shikibu was staring at me, but I felt so much better as I selected a song. A heart-wrenching love song, of course.

Just kidding.

"I'm coming for you!"

It wasn't a love song, but an up-tempo, powerful opening from a shonen anime adapted from manga.

"Whoa! You need a powerful voice to sing this one! I didn't know you could sing this sort of thing, Mashiro-chan!"

"I can't!"

"Say what?!"

"It's karaoke, so what matters is the atmosphere! Come and sing with me, Shikibu!"

Shikibu let out an ominous laugh. "You've given me the mic. Now lemme show you what this mouth can do!"

"Don't say stuff like that. Especially not at this time of night."

"Whooo! Let's get this party started!"

For the next hour and a bit I sang much louder than I was used to, until my throat felt raw and sweat was pouring down my body. But it felt good.

This *was* good. I was doing something I wasn't used to, getting over my weaknesses, and making progress. I could almost see Aki waiting at the end of the road.

Unfortunately for Aki, I was going to have to add some extra pages to the two-hundred-and-forty-page date plan I gave him, including some corrections and revisions. Canary-san always told me off for adding too many extra pages in subsequent versions, but she always admitted those pages were important in the end.

I needed to make those additions because they were important.

Thanks to Shikibu, I realized that those two-hundred-and-forty pages were no good. If I wanted to change myself so that I could stand

by Aki's side, I needed to make something *very special* happen at the climax of our story. Only then would it be complete.



05th Floor Alliance (4)



...



AKI

Oh yeah, Makigai-sensei. Did that date you were talking about go well?



Makigai Namako

Haven't been yet. Tomorrow's the day.



AKI

I timed my message well, then!



OZ

Did you decide to go to the summer festival in the end?



Makigai Namako

Yeah.



AKI

Funny coincidence. I'm going to a festival tomorrow too.



Makigai Namako

Y-Yeah, they do festivals all over this time of year.



Makigai Namako

It's not that uncommon.



OZ

Your thing's a date too, right?



AKI

Well, it's a date but it's also not... Stop teasing me.



OZ

Sorry, sorry ☆



AKI

I've been thinking more and more lately that you and Iroha are very much brother and sister.



OZ

Wait, is Makigai-sensei's spiritual pressure gone?

AKI

AKI

Looks like it. It says he's read our messages, though.

AKI

AKI

Maybe his editor's calling or something.

OZ

OZ

Maybe this talk's somehow awkward for him.

AKI

AKI

Stop being so weirdly direct.



Murasaki Shikibu-sensei

isn't buster sword just magical?!

AKI

AKI

Here she is, springing up out of the blue.



Murasaki Shikibu-sensei

hey, the only springing up i'll accept is the type that happens in doujinshi!

AKI

AKI

What are you talking about?

OZ

OZ

Buster Sword? You mean the Grand Fantasy game?



Murasaki Shikibu-sensei

yep! the remake of the seventh game that came out in spring! one of the best series honeyplace works has ever done!



Murasaki Shikibu-sensei

i've been busting through my backlog of games this summer, since I had no illustration deadlines and no classes!



Murasaki Shikibu-sensei

clarith-chan's big-cross-slash is so cool!



Murasaki Shikibu-sensei

and she was childhood friends with tifu-kun! it's so emotional!

AKI

AKI

Eh, I played the original.



Murasaki Shikibu-sensei

what the hell are you saying?! knowing the original is what makes it



Murasaki Shikibu-sensei

if you think i got duped, go listen to the theme song! it's on ytube!

AKI

AKI

So it is.

AKI

AKI

It's based on the original theme, but has been arranged for a modern orchestra.

AKI

AKI

They've done well with this.



Murasaki Shikibu-sensei

i know right? they've updated my memories by a factor of several tens!



Murasaki Shikibu-sensei

you guys should forget your festival dates and come sink those hours into gf7 instead!

OZ

OZ

You trying to force a change of subject?



Murasaki Shikibu-sensei

hyuck?! o-o-of course not!



Murasaki Shikibu-sensei

i'm just recommending everyone something i like at my own pace!

OZ

OZ

Hmm. Sounds sus. Feels to me like you're hiding something.



Murasaki Shikibu-sensei

i-i-i-i'm gonna go dive into some video games!

Chapter 5: Our Otoi-san Is Deep to Me!

The promised day arrived.

The summer festival wasn't due to start until the evening, but the whole area from the shopping district to the shrine was already busy with people setting up their stalls. There were so many people coming and going, and they all seemed to be walking with a spring in their step.

At the very edge of that lively road—in the shadows where nobody would notice them—two suspicious figures were hurrying along. They each wore a deerstalker hat low over their faces, shades to cover their eyes, masks over their mouths, and long-sleeved coats despite the season. They were very much the kind of people you didn't want to approach.

Oh, and one of them was me. The other was Iroha.

We crossed over the railway tracks, followed the sloping path on the opposite side of the station, and made our way to a quiet, affluent neighborhood a small distance away. The only people who should be walking here were members of the upper class or kidnappers. We made our way to our destination, feeling overcome with restless guilt—the kind the latter of those two would have felt.

Otoi. That was the name written on the plate affixed to the wooden gates of the traditional Japanese house. We slipped right past those gates and into the main residence. With the permission of the occupier, of course. Said occupier didn't come out to greet us, because it would be, and I quote, “a pain in the ass.”

We passed through the courtyard towards a storehouse away from the main building, and started down the stairs leading into its basement.

“Hey. What's with the weird outfits?” Otoi-san was slumping down in an expensive-looking chair imported from abroad. When she saw what we were wearing, her brow furrowed.

We pulled it all off: the hat, the shades, and the mask, to show that we were harmless.

“We just needed to stay on the down low,” I said.

“Pffaaah! I was boiling in this thing!”

“You can turn the AC up if you want. Remote's over there,” Otoi-san said.

“You’re a queen, Otoi-san! I’m gonna turn it aaall the way down! Take that and that and that and that and that!”

“Quit it already. We’ll get sick if you turn it that low so quickly.”

“Hey! Give that back!”

As I undid her sixteen clicks of the button, Iroha bounced around me trying to grab the remote back, looking just like a kid on Christmas.

“Why were you guys sneakin’ ’round then? Ain’t like you to ignore the risk of heatstroke, Aki.”

“Right. You know about my contract with Tsukinomori-san? Well...”

As long as he was suspicious of me being close to another girl, I couldn’t just go around town with Iroha in tow in broad daylight. I needed to be as careful as I could. At the very least, until I had word that he’d called off his spies.

Even without that threat, I didn’t want too many people to see Iroha and me coming into Otoi-san’s studio if I could help it.

“So that’s why it’s bad if he suspects there’s anything going on with Iroha.”

“Gotcha. I remember now.”

“I literally told you about it the other day.”

“Yeah, but I didn’t care. I’m not in the Alliance, so that contract and its benefits don’t mean anythin’ to me anyway.”

“I guess. But jeez, you sure don’t hold back, huh?”

Despite how close we were, Otoi-san wasn’t an official member of the 05th Floor Alliance. She was our third-party sound engineer, helping out solely with the background music, sound effects, and Iroha’s recordings.

Even if the contract I had with Tsukinomori-san made it to the end game, Otoi-san wouldn’t be getting a job at Honeyplace Works. To be more accurate, she didn’t actually *want* a job there.

“Workin’ for a company is a pain. I wanna work with sound, but doin’ it for somebody else is askin’ too much.”

“That’s why you’ve built your own studio here and are flying solo, right?”

“Y’need a base of operations if you wanna live the slow life. Oh, Kohinata. You can have some of the snacks from that box there if y’want. They’re from Aomori.”

“Whoa, you’re so kind, Otoi-san! Your generosity’s deeper than a lake!”

“Aaand triggered.”

“Whuh?!” Iroha’s voice cracked at the unexpected response.

Otoi-san’s expression didn’t change, but if she said something had triggered her, that meant she was mad. Usually, I was the one setting

her off like this, but this time, the award went to Iroha for a change. She seemed pretty flustered too, probably because she wasn't used to it.

“Wait, what triggered you? ‘Kind,’ ‘generosity,’ or ‘lake?’”

“Not tellin’. Too much of a pain to explain. Work it out, and then be more careful ’bout what you say.”

“Senpai!”

“Don’t come crying to me. I can’t help you.”

I was just as clueless as she was. If I knew which word it was, I’d add it to my list of words not to say in Otoi-san’s presence, and then make sure I didn’t make the same mistake.

Mentioning the five lakes of Fuji had set her off before, so I was inclined to say “lake” was what did it this time, but I didn’t have enough information to know for sure. I felt like a YTuber trying to work out which secret rule they’d broken to get themselves banned.

The best thing I could do right now was change the subject.

“Have you made any progress in your songwriting study, Otoi-san?”

“Yeah, I’ve put together some songs. All of ’em are still drafts, though.”

“Whoa! I wanna hear them. Please?!” Iroha said.

“Same here, if you don’t mind.”

We thrust our hands up in the air so that we could leave the topic that had triggered her behind— No, so that we could share in Otoi-san’s creativity. In all truth, I was pretty interested to see what sort of song Otoi-san had come up with.

“Seriously? ’Kay, I’ll let you guys hear a bit before we start recordin’.”

“Yahoo!”

Otoi-san even seemed a little pleased at Iroha wagging an invisible tail in excitement. She turned to the computer in front of her and started tapping away at the keyboard. Otoi-san loaded up an audio file, then let the music play.

Otoi-san was laid-back, chill, and relaxed. I listened closely, expecting the melodies she crafted to be healing.

“VOOOOOOOOOOOOOOORGH!”

My eardrums withered up and died.

“This death growl is...your song?”

“Eek! Ow! My ears!”

“Didn’t I tell you guys? Rock’s my favorite genre. So I wanted to make my own rock song someday.”

The speakers trembled as they regurgitated a satanic roar. It was a healing melody indeed, if by “healing” you meant “traumatizing.” The violent “tune” that followed on from that death roar claimed two

squirming victims. But it turned out this was only the beginning.

“Guoorgh! There’s fluid leaking from my ears! I— Hm?”

“Huh? Wait...”

The expressions on our faces changed. The initial explosive sound was so unexpected we were preparing for our untimely demise, but the overwhelmingly violent noise was gradually starting to turn into something pleasant.

“Wait... Is this song...actually super good?”

“I feel like there’s a bunch of stuff just...being created inside my head!”

“Right. So these rapid beats comin’ together are s’posed to mess up your brain so you can’t think straight, and then...”

Otoi-san’s usual languid voice had a tiny spring to it, as though our praise of her creation made her happy. I didn’t know she had the capability to be charming like this—as long as you ignored the part where it sounded like her music was brainwashing people.

“Who’s singing these lyrics?” Iroha asked.

“Oh yeah. I was wondering that myself,” I said.

Otoi-san stared blankly at us, tilting her head slowly. “Me.”

“Huh?” We responded in unison.

The voice singing that high-tempo rock song that was still playing was deep and husky. While Otoi-san didn’t have access to any professional singers, that voice was so glamorous and fit so well with the sound that it highlighted simply how good the song was. I stared at Otoi-san; like always, she was still the girl that perpetually looked bored and exhausted.

“How are you capable of producing a voice like this?”

“Somethin’ wrong with that?”

“No. In fact, it’s very impressive...”

But it just didn’t suit her personality one iota. Given how softly she usually spoke, I could only guess that she’d poured in a lifetime’s worth of lung capacity into this one song.

I’d discovered a new side of her today. Eventually, the song came to an end, and a few minutes passed.

“Bravo! Bravo, Otoi-san!” Iroha burst into applause.

“That was...good. I’m seriously impressed,” I said, taking my time to really let the song permeate my senses.

The one thing that joined us together were the small beads of tears that formed in the corners of our eyes.

“You could take on the whole songwriting world! You could even use your incredible vocals to become a singer-songwriter!”

“Kohinata...you’re exaggeratin’.”

“I am *not*! You could be the world-famous Otoi! Flawless singer Otoi! I’ll buy a hundred copies of your CD when it’s out! Heh heh

heh!" Iroha grabbed at Otoi-san's shoulders playfully.

Otoi-san and the chair underneath her swayed with the weight, and she shot me an unimpressed look.

"She's a pain. Was this the whole 'annoying' thing you were talkin' about, Aki? Now I know what it's like to be you..."

"I'm just glad more people can sympathize with me. But you know what I mean now, right?"

"It's good, right?" I mouthed at her.

Otoi-san stroked Iroha's head in a motherly fashion and gave a small nod. "You're right."

She gently pushed Iroha—who was now nuzzling her—away and straightened her expression back into professional mode. I mean, there was barely any visible change, so you need to understand that it was all nuance...anyway, she was back to normal.

"C'mon, we're not here to focus on my side projects. Get in the booth, 'cause we're gonna get started."

"Okay! I'm not gonna let you get ahead, Otoi-san! Lemme show you what I've got!" Iroha grinned and flexed her biceps. Taking the script from her bag, she bounded into the recording booth.

"Iroha may've sounded like she was being over-the-top when she praised you," I said as we watched her go, "but that's her way of showing how impressed she was. I don't lie about my opinions either. It was really something, Otoi-san."

"Gotcha."

Her reply was curt, and there was barely any change in her facial expression. But as someone who'd known her for as long as I did, I could tell that my words sparked joy for her.

"I can smell it. Garish like roses, fragrant like wine. It's the smell of an exquisite incident."

Kokuryuuin Kugetsu's recording was going smoothly. Her creation was the result of an accumulation of the best the 05th Floor Alliance had to offer, and it was all thanks to the proposal put forward by superstar editor Kiraboshi Kanaria.

"Let us begin the feast of darkness! Allow my wine to intoxicate you and reveal to me the cutiest-wootiest side you have to offer!"

This character combined light and darkness: the cringey charm of a fantasy-obsessed middle schooler and the charm that came with being damn annoying. And thanks to Iroha's superb acting skills, Kokuryuuin Kugetsu came to life in an incredibly vivid way.

"There are none who favor a life of solitude. I alone am the sole exception, for I command power far beyond humanity's wildest dreams!"

At some point, Otoi-san had started leaning forward over the audio control panel. I noticed then that she had a pretty slouched posture.

“Permit me to lavish you with praise! You are the first to have plunged so deeply into the abyss of my heart. I pledge all myself to you.”

The recording was deeply impressive. It felt as though the world were moving along without regard for the laws of physics; not even the length of a minute.

“I jest! Why, were you expecting something else, Your Pervertness? How risible!”

Ah, now I remembered. This character was charming.

These strange, burning—almost dutiful—emotions that had been swirling around inside me recently weren’t wrong. I wanted to share Iroha’s cute annoying charm with lots of people. I wanted her to find a best friend who would accept the true Iroha.

It wasn’t my business. It was egotistical self-righteousness. There were all sorts of negative ways I could describe this feeling, but none of them were enough to make me want to stop. This was probably just who I was intrinsically.

I’m sorry, Iroha.

It doesn’t matter what you think. I’m going to step in here as your annoyingly persistent producer.

We finished up the recording without a hitch.

The hour hand on the clock had just entered the final corner in its lap towards five. My sense of timing got messed up whenever I was underground, but the sky would probably be turning red once we got outside.

There was a look of refreshed satisfaction on Iroha’s face when she exited the booth. I thought her work today was absolutely fantastic, and it looked like she felt the same way.

After quickly gathering up her stuff, Iroha turned towards us with a flourish. “I’ll be heading off now, okay? I gotta meet my friends.”

“Sure. Have fun.”

“You too, Senpai. You really think you can show Mashiro-senpai a good time, seeing as you’re a virgin and all?”

“There’s nothing for you to worry about. I’ve got all the knowledge I need from movies and manga.”

“You’re screwed.” Iroha laughed.

“Shut it. Just go already.”

Of course I wasn’t confident I could do this whole date thing properly. Besides, it was Mashiro who’d engineered this fake date, so

she was going to be the one showing *me* the good time.

Wait. Did Mashiro take the lead because she didn't trust me to sort a date myself?

The very thought was pretty awful. So I decided not to think about it.

"Okaaay! Off I go!"

"Bye."

"See ya."

Otoi-san and I raised a hand to send her off. Iroha stole one last, rueful look back at us before making her way out of the studio.

"Don'cha have somewhere to be, Aki? Thought y'had a date with Tsukinomori."

"Yeah, but I've still got some time before we're due to meet. I also don't want one of Mashiro's dad's grunts to see me walking around with Iroha when we don't have our disguises on."

"Right. So you're leavin' separately." Otoi-san absentmindedly reached out to a box of snacks and pulled out a Suckie. She unwrapped it and stuck it into her mouth, roughly rolling the round candy around on her tongue. Well, I couldn't *see* that she was doing it "roughly." That part was just my imagination. "Keepin' secrets is annoyin'. Gotta keep your brain switched on."

"That's why I'm keeping a lot of this stuff vague. Actually, I was thinking I'd check out Iroha's group, commit their faces to memory. Make it easier to recognize 'em at the festival."

"Huh? Wait, so you're stalkin' her after all?"

"If I don't spot her at the festival I'll leave it, but if I do, I was just thinking of following her."

"Now you're talkin' like a piece of shit," Otoi-san said with a sage nod.

"Hey, you're the one who suggested the whole stalking thing in the first place."

"I'm not talkin' about stalkin' here." Otoi-san pulled the Suckie from her mouth and started tracing circles on it with her tongue. "Tsukinomori likes you, right? You'd hafta be a piece of shit to make this girl who likes you tag along while you stalk some other chick."

"Ugh..." Her words stabbed me sharply in the chest. "Y-Yeah... It might be a fake date, but I guess she'd still want to enjoy it..."

"Probably."

"So should I forget about Iroha and just give Mashiro the date she wants?"

"Also a bad move. You're bendin' over backwards to do everythin' for her when your heart's not in it. That's what y'call 'leading her on.'"

"What am I supposed to do then?"

"You were kinda screwed the moment this whole thing came

together.”

“Unngh...”

Otoi-san was absolutely right.

All of this was pure selfishness on my part, both wanting Honeyplace Works to hire the entire Alliance, and wanting Iroha to find a best friend. I had no excuses.

I'd rejected Mashiro's confession, and yet I was continuing this conspiratorial fake relationship with her simply because it suited me. What made things even more complicated was that she wanted our fake relationship to continue too. Was I just taking advantage of her feelings by allowing this to keep going?

“You turned her confession down, right?”

“Yeah, because of my promises to you and Iroha. That I'd give up my youth for all of this.”

“Gotcha. So now you're kinda caught up in this weird half-hearted relationship.”

“I feel guilty...bad for Mashiro, if I'm honest. But if you ask me what I'm gonna do about it, I seriously don't have a clue.”

I thought I'd done my best to give her a genuine answer: that we couldn't be a couple, and that I couldn't think about romance right now. But then Mashiro said she wouldn't give up, and because of the agreement I had with her dad, I couldn't cut off our fake relationship.

On top of that, after the ceremony in Kageishi village and our time at the beach, I started having some strange feelings towards Iroha, and now I had no idea which way my emotions were heading.

Depending on how you looked at things, I was only keeping my relationship with Mashiro going out of convenience, while being completely aware of her feelings.

That wasn't my *intention*, of course. But writing out the truth like that made me very aware that any possible excuses I might have had were buried under a layer of cement.

“I don't really know what would be fairest to Mashiro here. Should I forget about her confession and just try and act naturally? Or should I go out of my way to make her happy and avoid hurting her?”

“Hmm... Yeah... Well, y'know, I'm no expert on romance, but...”

Otoi-san allowed the light to reflect off her lollipop while she stared at it thoughtfully. The next words out of her mouth were unpredictable and impactful; a far cry from the indifferent, monotonous tone with which she spoke them. “Wouldn't it be kinda noble to just accept that you're a piece of shit in this situation?”

It was rare for me to feel the phrase “hit by a freight train” so keenly. While I struggled to digest the meaning of her words, Otoi-san grunted like a newborn zombie as she tried to come up with a way to explain herself.

“I said y’were screwed, right? The second you got yourself in this mess, you were officially a piece of shit.”

“Well... Yeah.”

“Then don’t try and come out of this smellin’ like roses.”

“Ah. Right...”

I didn’t want to hurt Mashiro. I wanted to have an honest relationship with her. Trying to have both those things at this late stage of the game was kind of despicable. I knew Mashiro had feelings for me, and yet I was still keeping up this act of being her fake boyfriend. Piece of shit was right. But while I was in this situation anyway, I at least wanted to act like a decent human as much as I could.

If I wanted to face Mashiro while giving my all to everything I wanted to do, there was just one thing for it. To continue to feel this guilt towards her, and to be bad.

“Thanks, Otoi-san. I know what I should do now...I think.”

I had no clue if I was right. How could I? I’d spent seventeen years staying away from typical youth things and romance.

“I knew you’d come up with something deep, seeing as you’re the type of girl who studies songwriting by Mount Osore.”

“Y’makin’ fun of me?” Otoi-san asked, though she didn’t sound serious.

“Nope. I’m too much of a coward for that.” I shot her a mischievous smile of my own.

I didn’t know how I was going to feel during my fake date with Mashiro. I had no way to know what I was *supposed* to feel either.

But while I once thought desires, romance, and all that other stuff related to youth was totally inefficient, I’d now learned they were necessary to improve myself as the 05th Floor Alliance’s director. With this new knowledge in hand, I felt like I now needed to face the girl known as Mashiro more seriously than I had before, even if I couldn’t properly date her because of my promise with Tsukinomori-san. I at least wanted to be able to understand where my feelings stood.

“By the way, even pieces of shit need to use protection.”

“I wasn’t planning to sink *that* low!”

“I’ll take care of everything once you’re gone, so don’t worry about that.”

“You make it sound like you expect me to die.”

“Might be hard to grab your corpse for the funeral if you’re sent off by boat, though.”

“This isn’t like some crazy love affair that’s gonna leave a mark after I’m gone. I hope not, at least.”

Chapter 6: My Fake Girlfriend Wears a Yukata for Me!

Sunset was soon approaching. The cool wind that blew through the lukewarm air at intervals of five to ten seconds felt good on my skin. It was the perfect weather for a festival.

There were crowds of yukata-clad youths walking in front of the station. With the start of the festival coming closer, there was an air of joviality in our otherwise unremarkable town.

These people were wasting their lives.

Until now, that would have been the first thing I would have said as I watched the lively townscape in front of me. Looking at their lives as a whole, temporary pleasures that fizzled away—like all this—was a loss. I would have watched them with a cold and indifferent gaze.

But I no longer had the right to criticize these foolish members of the general public, because...

“Sorry to keep you waiting.”

“No, I just got here myself.”

Mashiro and I met by the first floor of a multi-tenant building near the station and exchanged our stock phrases. Right now, there was nothing to separate us from the foolish general public. Anyone watching would have thought us an ordinary couple.

So, spy of Tsukinomori-san, if you’re watching, I hope you’re watching *carefully*. For once, I actually hoped we were being watched.

“Shall we go then? It’s...”

“On one of the floors above us.”

We stepped into the building through the narrow entrance. There were stairs, but they were blocked off by boxes. I couldn’t shake my concern for the fire hazard on display here as we walked to the tiny elevator together. We rode it up to the eight floor.

The sign read, “Imoko Yukata Rental.” It was packed full of young people, from our age up to college students.

Bodies, bodies, bodies, packed tightly together. All enthusiasm left me as I realized we were going to have to deal with these cramped conditions before the festival itself even started.

“This is crazy. Are we even gonna make it in time?” I asked.

“It’s okay, I booked in advance. They should get to us for our slot.”

“So most of these guys are just people who showed up on the

day?"

"Yeah. Don't worry, Aki. I don't make the same mistakes dumb normies do." Mashiro shot me a thumbs-up, the corner of her lip turning up somewhat smugly. She offered me her hand like it was the most natural thing in the world. "Let's go."

"Huh? R-Right..." She expected me to take her hand, so I did.

I-It's so soft...

How many years had it been since I'd held hands with Mashiro properly like this? Her hand had always seemed so little when we held hands as grade schoolers. It didn't feel that much bigger right now.

It made sense; we both grew at the same rate.

Mashiro led me along by the hand.

"E-Excuse me... We have a booking. Ah, sorry!"

It felt like we were swimming through a sea of people as we wove our way through. Mashiro was trembling and timid, but she opened up the path we needed. Her voice was small but assertive as she let others know of our presence.

To be honest, I was surprised. I always thought Mashiro was bad with crowds like this, but it seemed she'd learned to deal with them at some point.

"Don't push yourself. I can—"

"It's okay. I'm taking the lead today."

"R-Right."

She didn't want me to take over. When I tried to step forward, she assertively retook her position at the front.

There was no way she'd gotten over her fear of crowds. The obvious trembling coming from her hand in mine was proof of that...but I wasn't about to point it out.

After a few more seconds of valiant effort, we finally made it to the front counter. We showed our student IDs to prove our identity, at which point a smiling lady appeared with some neatly folded yukatas and showed us to the changing area behind her.

"Wait, she didn't ask my size..."

"I gave them all that info when I booked. You don't need to worry about a thing, Aki."

"You sure are well prepared."

"I picked out a design I thought you'd like. The size should be just right too."

"Wow, thanks. How did you know my size when you never took my measurements, though?"

"My ears are sharp and my eyes don't lie."

"That's kinda terrifying..."

I wondered just what sorts of things Mashiro could cut with those sharp ears, but I decided not to ask.

“Well, anything to save time is a plus in my book. It’s real efficient.”

“Right? I thought you’d say that.” Mashiro giggled.

Looking at her smile made me realize just how much she’d softened up from the stiff Mashiro who’d only just transferred to our school. The realization spread warmth through my chest.

The store assistant showed us to the changing area, where Mashiro and I split off into the male and female changing rooms.

I took my clothes off and pulled my yukata on over my underwear. I knew the basics of how to wear it, but I had a staff member check and adjust the front and sash to make sure I had it on properly. I grimaced a little when I saw myself in the mirror. I guess even the most average of people could look good if you dressed them up enough.

“She thought I’d like this one, huh? Heh...” I found myself scoffing as I studied the design of the yukata in the mirror.

It was dark blue with simple stripes. When I said simple, I meant it; there was nothing special about it. It was the embodiment of average. It reminded me of somebody...

“Mashiro’s right, though. I *do* like stuff like this.”

I didn’t think anything fancier than this would suit me, and I wouldn’t care for anything more plain. Its quality was high, while remaining simple and unassuming. It was a perfect match for me.

It was summer, and since start of summer break, I’d had tons of chances to wear traditional Japanese dress like this. But knowing that this was a yukata Mashiro had picked out for me made it feel oddly refreshing.

“She’s got a good eye.”

Secretly impressed, I stepped out of the changing area. By the way, this store looked after your bags while you were out, so all I had with me was a drawstring pouch containing my valuables. So I was going minimalist and not carrying anything excessive, which was important when you wanted to be elegant. And that suited me too.

“Mashiro’s not out yet, huh? Well, I guess girls *do* take longer.”

There was no sign of Mashiro in the waiting area, so I sat down in a chair and spaced out. It must’ve been a good few months since I’d spaced out like this. Recently, most of my brain had been constantly thinking about *Koyagi*.

We were done with the new character’s recording, and nothing urgent had cropped up, so right now there was nothing for me to think about.

Of course, I still needed to think about my plan to find Iroha a best friend and about making my fake date with Mashiro a success. But those things weren’t purely to do with work. They were about

youth and kicking back, everything that I had dismissed as a waste of time up until now.

When I stared absentmindedly into the crowds around the store, I got the feeling that the world I'd purposely been keeping at arm's length was suddenly much, much closer. Thoughts started drifting through my mind of their own accord.

The way that college student wore his yukata was cool. Even the most outgoing girls looked like Yamato Nadeshiko types when they wore traditional attire. There was a crazy-good-looking girl walking my way. Now she was standing in front of me and fidgeting, her cheeks red.

"S-Sorry for the wait. Wh-What do you think, Aki? Does it...suit me?"

The good-looking girl was Mashiro.

"A-Aki? Why aren't you saying anything?"

"U-Uh, sorry. I was, um...surprised."

I had been looking her up and down, my mind blank, when she prodded me for a response and caught me off guard.

My first impression? A winter beauty.

Her yukata's design was refined. It was white with a modest arrangement of primroses. Compared to the tropical and fruity colors that were in nowadays, it was more on the subdued side, but it did a great job of highlighting Mashiro's pure, mature charms. There was a modest pin in her neatly arranged hair.

I caught glimpses of her neck above her collar. Her slender wrists were accompanied by an accessory case that resembled a seashell in her hand. There were her bare feet in her sandals, and there were her ankles.

All of her gave off a quiet sexiness.

It wasn't a powerful glamor that slapped your instincts right in the face; it was more like a poisonous beauty that snaked into your veins and spread slowly until it had eaten into every part of your body. You heard stories of beautiful feminine spirits luring men into their cabins deep in the peaks of snowy, blustery mountains before going on to feed on their life force. If they really existed, they might well look like Mashiro did right now.

"D-Don't just stare at me without saying anything. It's embarrassing..."

"S-Sorry. You're just so pretty, I couldn't help it."

Mashiro squirmed, her face flaring with rage. "Y-You're not allowed to compliment me so directly! You're trying to kill me by embarrassment, aren't you?!"

"Wha— Sorry! I did it again!" I flung myself down at Mashiro's feet while she smacked me with her accessory case, called me an

“idiot,” and told me to “go die in a fire.”

There was no real malice or hostility to her voice, and the accessory case was only as heavy as a purse, so it didn't really hurt.

“Look at that couple! They look like they get along so well!”

“Wonder if they're high schoolers.”

“Aww! They're so innocent!”

More painful than Mashiro's strikes were the stares of the people around us.

“L-Let's go.”

“Yeah.”

Noticing the attention we were getting, Mashiro ducked her red face down to conceal it from view, then grabbed my hand and pulled me away with far more strength than I'd expect from those slender arms of hers. She pushed through the waves of people a lot more assertively than when we came in, and together we dashed out of Imoko Yukata Rental.

Mashiro apparently wanted to get out of here as quickly as possible, so she didn't wait for the elevator. Instead, she began hurrying down the stairs...from the eighth floor all the way down to the first. She lost her balance and threatened to fall a few times, probably because she wasn't used to wearing those sandals.

With each flight we cleared, her stiff, self-conscious expression seemed to soften slightly, and soon she even started laughing as though she was realizing the pure absurdity of her actions.

She squeezed sideways through a tiny gap between the boxes piled up on the first floor. When I followed after her, she was waiting for me with a smile.

“That was kind of fun.”

“Kinda crazy too.”

“I didn't notice they'd blocked this path off. Does that make us outlaws?”

“We're fine. You gotta be able to get through here or they're breaking fire regulations.”

“Oh. We're a lawful couple, then.”

“Couple,” I began reflexively.

“Stop.” Mashiro had her index finger on the tip of my nose before I could point out that our relationship wasn't a real one. “We're a couple for today, aren't we?”

“Oh yeah...baby.”

“Don't.”

It sounded like that lovers' skit we did lay long buried in the darkness of the past.

Definitely a wise decision on her part...

I'd lived in this area for years, but the sight of the summer festival was almost too much nostalgia to handle. I had lived here with my parents before I moved to my current place next door to the Kohinatas, but I hadn't been to the festival since falling out of touch with my cousins, the Tsukinomoris.

I won't bother going into detail about my move or what my parents are doing right now, because it's not relevant.

At the end of the bustling, stall-filled shopping street stood a huge, imposing archway. We slipped past the two annoying, scowling lion-dogs, then went up some stairs to find the grounds of the shrine decorated with multicolored paper lanterns. Those wide grounds were filled with people and stalls, and there were volunteers from the town playing festival music in the main clearing. They were clearly trying to appeal to the younger crowd, as they were playing a festive arrangement of the theme song from Honeyplace Works' recent *Grand Fantasy 7 Remake*, the popular game Murasaki Shikibu-sensei had been going crazy for.

Our town didn't have much to distinguish it from any other, but now that the time had come to put on a show, the air was abuzz.

A lot of the people walking the paths were loud. Mashiro and I were the unsociable types, and we ended up freezing on the spot, totally overwhelmed.

"They're not trying to make this easy on us, huh? How are we supposed to get around when it's so packed?"

"W-Wait. There's a strategy on page two hundred and thirty-eight."

"We're not seriously gonna look up every last thing in the plan, are we? And it sounds like the final two pages really were the only important ones..."

Mashiro had pulled out her phone and was now searching through the date plan document—but standing still like this in such a crowded place could lead to only one thing.

"Eek!"

"Careful! Oh, hey. I got it!"

"Th-Thanks. You've got good reflexes, Aki." Mashiro looked relieved.

Somebody had bumped into her and she'd nearly dropped her phone, but I had managed to catch it in midair, earning me a compliment from her.

"I was waiting for something like that to happen, so my body was ready."

"Hmph. You sound too cool, like some shonen manga protagonist.

I don't like it."

"Why not? You should be praising me for being cool."

"No. Being cool makes you cocky." Mashiro averted her gaze sulkily, and I found myself doubting whether she really had feelings for me. All of a sudden, her eyes flew open, and she was looking around like a squirrel on the lookout for predators.

"Are you looking for your dad's spies? It doesn't feel to me like we're being watched or anything right now."

The only people around us were visitors in yukatas and old men calling for people to come see their stalls. Honestly, though, with a crowd like this, it felt like I wouldn't be able to notice if we were being watched even if there was a spy among them. Apparently I was wrong anyway, because Mashiro shook her head.

"That's not it."

"What are you looking for then?"

"Sometimes I feel like I recognize someone in the crowd. Like I've passed them in the school corridors once or something."

"Well, this festival is a pretty big deal in this town."

"Oh no! But if they see us together, they'll spread rumors. And that'll be really embarrassing..."

"Have you forgotten why we're on this date in the first place?"

Mashiro had buried her burning face in her hands like the overwhelmed protagonist of a shojo manga. She really *had* forgotten that we were here to convince people we were actually a couple, hadn't she?

But, knowing how she felt, maybe this kind of reaction was only natural.

"O-Oh yeah. We need to do more lovey-dovey stuff."

"I mean, no, we're in public and—"

"We need to do more lovey-dovey stuff."

"Right you are, ma'am." I had no choice but to nod when her voice turned threatening.

After that, Mashiro and I decided to go around every stall methodically, to make sure our classmates would see us. The first stall Mashiro pointed at to visit was goldfish scooping.

Kids were trying their luck and failing one after the other, thrusting their broken scoops at the stone-faced stallholder in complaint. The tiny fish were swimming in the tank without a care in the world, their expressions somehow mocking, and, boy, if it wasn't annoying.

"I haven't done this in ages. You want one?"

"Yeah. The cuteness of seafood runs deeper than the Marina Trench."

"Don't call it 'food.' Either you like the taste or the way it looks,

but pick one.”

“But part of the cuteness comes from the transience and nobility that results from being at the bottom of the food chain...”

“I can’t keep up with the weird justifications for your opinions. But if you want one, I’ll get you one.”

I’d played games like this now and then ever since elementary school. I wasn’t a master who could get a fish in one go, but if I failed enough times and analyzed why I’d failed, eventually I could improve to the point that I could nab one. That strategy led me to get a fish about half the time, which led me to the conclusion that goldfish scooping was a pretty well-balanced game.

Nostalgia washed over me as I thought back to that one time when Mashiro got sulky because she couldn’t get a fish, so I caught one for her.

“It’s okay. I can get one myself,” Mashiro declared, holding up a hundred yen coin next to her face with all the confidence of a first-rate gambler.

When had she gotten so good at this kind of thing? Though I had my doubts, if she said she could do it, I was willing to believe her. I gave her an encouraging push forward.

Ten minutes later, she was a thousand yen in the hole.

“Hey, you’re her boyfriend, aren’t you? Why don’t you stop her?”

The stallholder must’ve been feeling guilty, because Mashiro was lining his pockets right now. He made an excellent point too.

“Yeah... Hey, Mashiro. Why don’t you leave it for now?”

“No. One more go please, mister.”

“You’re going over a thousand yen! That’s way too much! Think about it: is a goldfish really worth that much?”

“I’ve got money. This is nothing. I can’t stop here, or I’ll have wasted all the money I’ve already spent!”

“You sound like someone throwing money at a gacha game just to get that one percent SSR card.”



“That doesn’t make sense, Aki. Even a one percent SSR becomes a hundred percent chance if you never stop rolling till you get it.”

“I told you to stop using your literary prowess to come up with nonsense that sounds logical as long as you don’t think about it for more than one second!”

“Let go! I’m not giving up!”

“You’re really serious about this, huh?” the stallholder said. “I guess this is how young girls born into rich families end up... Okay, I’m ready for ya, and I like your attitude. Here, take a new scoop!”

“Thank you, mister! See, Aki? This is where determination gets you!”

My attempts to stop her were in vain. Mashiro swapped another hundred yen coin for a new scoop. And then...

Another several hundred yen coins were sent up to heaven. Meanwhile, the stallholder was blessed with a brand new concept of selling ten turns for a thousand yen note. Then, just when Mashiro’s total payments had equaled what was probably the maximum single microtransaction possible in your average gacha game...

“I-I got it!” Mashiro let out a triumphant cry and held her wooden bowl, complete with goldfish, above her head.

Beside her lay a pile of broken, lifeless scoops, a testament to the valiant effort it had taken her to claim victory. And I wasn’t the only one watching over her vicious struggle anymore.

The audience, who had come to see the spectacle and watched with bated breath, were now cheering and applauding. Being really bad at something was an art in itself, I supposed: Mashiro’s attempts were clumsy, and yet these people weren’t able to look away. As a producer, I was curious. Perhaps it was a peculiar sort of charm on her part.

“Did you see that, Aki? I got one!”

“Yeah! I saw the whole thing.”

I almost told her that I was watching the millions of times she failed too, but seeing how happy she was took the mean-spirited words right out of my mouth.

“Heh heh! Well, Aki? I got one without your help! By my own efforts!” A smug smile on her face, Mashiro made a big show of her goldfish, her voice slowly growing hoarse—because she’d just noticed the countless warm gazes that were centered on her. “A-A crowd?! U-Um, please... Please don’t stare at me...”

Mashiro started to retract back into herself like a deflating balloon. She was still incredibly shy when it came to people who weren’t me. By which I also mean that I was the only person she treated coldly.

The audience just cheered and clapped louder, apparently fond of the way she'd switched from excitable child to timid maiden.

Jealous of the attention we were getting, the volunteers playing music began to bang their drums even louder, which ended up attracting even more people. Mashiro's blush was reaching boiling point as she found herself unwittingly at the center of everyone's attention. The second she got the bag with the goldfish in it from the stallholder, she grabbed my hand.

"T-Time to retreat!"

In a way unbecoming of a pair of extolled heroes, Mashiro and I weaved our way through the cheering crowd around us and slipped back in with the general public.

Maybe this was the only time when my lack of presence was actually useful. But what's the point of having a skill with close to zero uses?

Anyway, that was how our fake date left the people around us with the lasting impression that Mashiro and I were a perfect couple... Or, more accurately, that we were a weird couple who did entertaining things for them to gawk at.

It was mainly thanks to Mashiro.

The show she put on at the goldfish scoop stall was just the tip of the iceberg, a prelude for the interesting events to come. After that, Mashiro went around challenging every prize-winning game there was: the shooting range, the ring toss, the mini bowling game where they used plastic bottles as pins...

Of course, with her lack of coordination and ability, every last one of them posed a challenge for her. But every time, it was the power of money—sorry, the power of her indomitable spirit—that seized victory for her and won her the prizes she wanted.

Right now, Mashiro had a large shopping bag in her hand. Stuffed inside were the plushies and marine creature goods she'd won. The result of her blood, sweat, tears, and cold hard cash.

That's right. Mashiro never let me get her the items she wanted.

It was obvious that letting me do it would be a cheaper and more efficient way of winning prizes. Mashiro should have remembered how things had gone back in elementary school as well as I did. She should've known that, while I wasn't especially good at these games, at least I would have won in fewer turns than she had.

She wouldn't even let me carry her gigantic bag, instead carrying it all by herself.

Was this some sort of weird challenge she was setting herself? I know she said she wanted to take the lead, but I couldn't believe she

meant to apply that principle to absolutely everything about today. Because if she did, I'd feel really...guilty.

Mashiro was in love with me. She wanted me to notice her, and she was working hard to make our time together a fun one. But I had to admit that my reasons for going on this fake date with her were nothing so heartwarming. It was purely because it benefited the Alliance.

What if I followed Otoi-san's advice and acted like a piece of shit? Then at least both Mashiro and I would be able to enjoy this date. It was just for tonight. I should make the effort to make the girl I was seeing happy, shouldn't I?

I'd made up my mind. I was gonna go all in and act as a real boyfriend to Mashiro tonight.

"O-Ooooooboshi-kun?!"

And then we ran into somebody I hadn't expected to see.

After Mashiro had picked up all her prizes, we were refueling ourselves with piping hot takoyaki at another stall.

The timing couldn't have been more (im)perfect. It was just as Mashiro was bringing the steaming takoyaki on a pick to my mouth and telling me to "say aah," in that classic girlfriend-type way. The person who witnessed it was also the one I'd least want to witness something like that.

"Oh... Hey, Midori-san. Fancy seeing you here."

"Y-Yes, good evening... Wait a moment! This is no time to be casual!"

Ah yes, the automatic response before blowing up halfway through your dialogue. She pulled it off well. As I'm sure you already realize, this was Kageishi Midori, the head of our school's drama club.

While modest, her yukata was undeniably cute and feminine. The way her obi and cord were done up so tight and neatly gave away how proper and precise her personality was.

Midori was Sumire's little sister, and, as to be expected of someone from a long line of teachers, she was incredibly smart. She was an honor student of supernatural proportions, who got every question correct in every single test she'd ever taken since she entered our school.

She was here with the other girls of the drama club, who stood behind her in yukatas. They waved at me and greeted me with a smile.

"Huh? *Huh*?! Wh-Why are you with Tsukinomori-san?!"

"Oh, uh. It's, uh... It's kinda hard to explain..." While I fumbled for an explanation, one of the drama club girls (I think her name was Yamada-san) helped me out.

"Didn't you know, Midori-san? Ooboshi-kun and Tsukinomori-san

are dating. Everyone in their class knows, at least.”

“Really?!” Midori croaked like a frog crushed in Dwayne Johnson’s fist.

I say she “helped me out,” but it’s pronounced “added twelve gallons of fuel to the fire.”

“Wait, that doesn’t make sense. I mean... I mean...!”

So there’s probably something important I should mention.

While Kageishi Midori might have been one of the top honor students in the country, she had two major weaknesses. The first was that her acting ability was catastrophically bad. The second was that, while she was smart, she could be kinda...dumb.

“Ooboshi-kun’s a super talented Hollywood director, *and* he married my sister!”

AAARGH! As if Mashiro alone wasn’t enough, why did there have to be another person who wasn’t able to process all the information they had, and then reach logical conclusions?!

To be fair, I had only recently found out, after talking with Mashiro, that I’d done a terrible job at managing who I’d shared the truth about our fake relationship with. And at keeping track of who thought what...

It didn’t help my complicated backstory that, when I helped the drama club, I had needed to hide the fact that Sumire was Murasaki Shikibu-sensei from Midori.

“I-I-I don’t believe this! First, you violate my sister, and if that wasn’t enough, now you’re two-timing with Tsukinomori-san?! Y-Y-You’re...deplorable!”

“S-Stop shouting!” I hurriedly slapped a hand over Midori’s mouth.

“Mmph?!”

I didn’t care what horrible thing she called me or who heard it—unless they were one of Tsukinomori-san’s spies. Then I’d be in real hot water. The risk was small, but it wasn’t zero, so I had to act.

Midori’s brain might have been big, but her face was unusually small, meaning my palm was enough to completely cover her mouth. She must’ve been boiling or something too, because she felt so hot that I could almost hear a sound like meat sizzling on a grill as moisture spread over my palm.

This probably looked pretty bad—criminal, even. And I knew my objective observation was correct, because the other drama club girls started screaming.

“O-Ooboshi-kun’s so bold!”

“Midori-san’s getting attacked! Isn’t this like those videos where the uptight committee president gets turned on?!”

“This’ll definitely get me some likes!”

“Stop taking pictures! And *seriously* don’t upload them! I have the right to my privacy, and it’s not free use!”

“Mmph! Mmph! (That’s right! Don’t just watch! Help me! He’s gonna assault me!)”

“I’m not gonna assault you. Think about it. You’d have to have real guts to do something like that here with so many witnesses.”

“Mmph! Mmph! (In the past, festivals used to be like entertainment districts! Until we imported Christmas, more sexual assaults occurred during these festivals than any other day of the year, and that’s no exaggeration!)”

“That’s a lot of information to communicate with just your eyes!”

She sure seemed to know a lot about the subject matter too. Maybe she really was a pervert. I’d always suspected it, but now I was certain.

“Mmph! Mmph! Mm! (If you won’t let go, then...it’s not like I want to do this, but if it’s just once, then please be gentle at least!)”

“Don’t just give up and go totally passive on me! I’m not doing anything—just don’t make a fuss!”

“Mmgh! Gulp! (Okay... I’ll be quiet... Listen, if you’re not after too much...)”

“Stop trying to turn this into some weird negotiation! Look, please. Just don’t make a big deal of this, okay?” I let go of her gently.

Her cheeks were flushed and her eyes were glistening. Her breaths were ragged.

“O-Ooboshi-kun! I can’t anymore! I can’t turn a blind eye. I’ve been holding this in for so long, but it’s time for me to tell you straight!” Midori glared at me steadily, her entire countenance right now strangely alluring. She was biting her lip in frustration, and I was preparing myself for the lowest insults the Japanese language had to offer.

“Add me on LIME!”

“Wait, what?!”

She was looking at me like I’d personally insulted her mother, and it was all over asking for my LIME details?

While I stood there confused, Midori thrust her phone under my nose. There was a QR code on the screen, meaning I really had heard her correctly.

She must have had a change of heart. When I was helping out with the drama club, I had offered to add her on LIME, but she’d insisted there was no way she could add a boy to her contacts: that was “the sort of thing that has to wait till marriage.”



If only she'd been so willing before, we would've been able to communicate a whole lot more efficiently. But I digress.

Stripping away the context, this was a pretty bold way of getting a guy's contact details. There was no way my girlfriend (for all intents and purposes) was going to overlook it.

Mashiro stepped forward between Midori and me.

"Wh-What are you doing, Midori-san? D-Don't flirt with taken men!"

"I-I-I'm not?! I just wanted his contact details—"

"But you are! I thought it was only in manga that the honor students were secret sluts, but I guess it happens in real life too... I gotta be more careful in my real-life dealings!"

"Slut?! Hold on a minute! I'm not like those girls who go around wearing revealing costumes in Shibuya, and I definitely haven't gone to any sleazy theme parks!"

Midori was seriously starting to go off the rails. The more she tried to deny it, the more of her depraved mind she was putting on show.

Also, I was seriously concerned about the sheer *mass* of knowledge she had.

"Just don't get the wrong idea, okay?! I'm not getting his details because I want to invite him on a date or because I want to call him when I'm all alone at night!"

"Really?"

"Yes. And I believe this will be to your advantage as well!"

"Hm?" Mashiro narrowed her eyes, suspicious.

Midori nodded fervently before thrusting a finger at my face. "Until recently, Ooboshi-kun was not only toying with my sister by dating her, but he had the gall to play the part of her fiancé! There may well be several other girls he is using in such a way—but I refuse to let him! In order to make sure Ooboshi-kun becomes a decent man, I wish to create an environment in which I can immediately question him and set him straight should I catch wind of him making a pass at my sister, or indeed carrying out any other impure activities!"

"I get it... So if he starts getting close to any other girls..."

"I'll object to him over LIME, and then share the information with you!"

"I accept your terms. Aki, add her on LIME."

"Way to sell me out."

I couldn't see why Midori expected me to hand over my details in the first place, given that she was planning to use them to monitor me. I mean, I'd hand them over anyway. It wasn't like I was planning to do anything like she was suggesting.

“Don’t misuse these details, okay?”

“W-Wait. Can I really have them?!”

Why did she look so incredibly happy? She was even leaning towards me.

“Y-Yeah. But be careful how you use them. I mean it.”

“O-Of course. I’ll limit my unimportant contact with you to an hour each day, so there’s no need to worry about that!”

“That’s what you call limiting it?”

Midori probably just wasn’t thinking about what she was saying because she was overexcited. She did seem unaccustomed to exchanging contact details with a boy.

So Midori and I added each other on LIME, and since Mashiro was there anyway, the two girls did likewise.

It was a weird thing to do in the middle of our fake date, but nothing about it undermined Mashiro’s status as my fake girlfriend. Even if one of her dad’s spies were watching, we’d have been fine. I think.

“Well, we’ll be going now. O-Ooboshi-kun? It may be a festival, but mind you don’t get ahead of yourself and do something...lewd, all right?!”

“Don’t worry, I won’t. See you at school,” I answered vaguely.

“See you.” Mashiro gave her farewell in the simplest manner she could.

Her face still flushed with a strange excitement, Midori was pulled away by her drama club back into the throng of people.

“Aki. Guilty,” Mashiro muttered.

“Of what?!”

“You were all over Midori-san! And you exchanged LIME details with her right in front of your girlfriend: me!”

“You told me to!”

“Even if I did, you should have used your own judgment and refused.”

“That’s so unreasonable. Why do girls have to be so complicated?”

“Because.” Mashiro poked her tongue out at me. “The more complicated the problem, the more you actively work to solve it. This is my plan to fill your brain with nothing but me.”

Mashiro paused and then let out a small giggle. “Just kidding.”

I suddenly felt something tighten around my heart when she teased me.

Honestly—it was cute. That thought came to mind with no resistance. Midori had said something about festivals originally accelerating desire (I think), so maybe I was falling straight into the trap set for me by the festival-organizers of the past.

Who was I to criticize the normies around us getting into the

festival spirit?

There was inefficient, and then there was me. It felt like I was changing so much recently that I just couldn't keep up with myself.

I decided to take Canary's advice, seeing as she was someone with more life experience than me. For now, I'd ride out the waves of these endless—almost useless—emotions, and just enjoy them as much as I could.

“Your girlfriend may be fake, but I can't believe you got some other girl's contact details in the middle of a date. On behalf of audiences everywhere, you deserve to die.”

“On the face of it, it sounds like I should be the happiest guy alive. So why don't I feel that way?”

Chapter 7: My Friend's Little Sister's Rival Has It In for Her!

A few minutes later, we bought some cotton candy and candy apples, then went back to enjoying the festival.

Mashiro must have aroused the stallholders' desires to protect, because the cotton candy she got and the candy on her apple were almost twice as much as they should have been. Every time we were teased for being a "cute couple," Mashiro's face would turn red, and it didn't make me feel that bad either.

See, Uncle Tsukinomori-san? Everyone thinks we're a couple.

I didn't know where they might be watching from, or indeed if these spies of his even existed in the first place, but if they were watching, I was confident that we looked like a picture-perfect couple.

Eventually the sky grew dark and an announcement echoed through the grounds that the fireworks would be starting in thirty minutes. An invisible fever seemed to settle on the guests as the temperature in the grounds rose just a touch.

The quiet static in the air that preceded the main event was the general populace's equivalent to the static of the line outside that biannual nerd convention. It wasn't until very recently that I even entertained the possibility that I might end up standing right in the middle of this frivolous atmosphere. I guess there were some things you could only experience by crossing to the other side and living life as a harmonious couple.

It seemed being a normie wasn't about your circumstances. It was about your attitude. No matter how much we acted like a close couple having fun, Mashiro and I were still as unsociable as ever. Even if observers thought we looked happy, it was unlikely any of them mistook us for normal.

Of course we weren't normal. We were right at home away from the crowds, here on this bench under a dark and slightly damp tree.

"I'm so tired." Mashiro let out a small laugh. "I don't think I'll ever get used to crowds like that."

"Drink this. You'll feel better." I pressed the ramune bottle against her cheek.

"That's nice and cool. Thanks." Mashiro looked relieved as she took it.

It may have been nighttime now, but it was still summer. Summer

nights were never that cool at the best of times, and this place was swarming with people. It looked like Mashiro was feeling the heat; sweat was beading on her face.

The ramune must've been like a gift from above to her. She started gulping it down thirstily, until the bubbles stung her nose and her face screwed up comically. It was so sweet I almost burst out laughing, but I could see her getting mad at me for being insensitive so I held it in. I was a man who learned from my mistakes.

"Huh? Is that Iroha-chan over there?" Having finished grappling with her ramune, Mashiro was now staring into the crowds.

I followed Mashiro's gaze. Right across from us there was a group of around seven girls. They were laughing and chatting, and all seemed like the outgoing type. In their center and laughing along with them was Kohinata Iroha: the Alliance's voice actress, who I'd been recording with in Otoi-san's studio earlier today; my friend's little sister; and her class's popular honor student.

Iroha was smiling in the exact same way she had been when I saw her in the classroom. The only difference was that she was wearing a yukata in light, warm colors instead of her uniform. A well-behaved, kind, and considerate honor student. Polite, but not reserved, overly serious, or uptight. She was fitting in well with her sociable classmates, even cracking the occasional joke.

"It is her. Hey, why are you hiding?"

"B-Because..." Mashiro was off the bench now and concealing herself behind the tree. "It'd be kind of awkward if she saw us..."

"I told you: Iroha already knows about our whole fake relationship thing."

"That's sort of why it's awkward. It feels like I'm getting an edge on her or something..."

"What, because we're having fun at the summer festival by ourselves? That's fine, I already explained it to everyone. I said we were going on a fake date to fulfill the Alliance's contract. Ozu has nothing better to do, so he's going through his backlog of new visual novels, and Murasaki Shikibu-sensei's busy being obsessed with the *GF7* remake. Everyone's enjoying the summer in their own way, so there's nothing for you to worry about."

"That's not what I mean...but fine. It's not like it's my job to explain it to you."

"Explain what?"

"L-Look, I just don't want her to see us. Leave me alone!"

What was with her?

I wasn't about to hide like she was, but it wasn't like I was planning to go talk to Iroha either. Iroha was having a fun time with her classmates right now. As her brother's friend, or even her senpai,

intruding on that all of a sudden would be a little more than socially ignorant.

Iroha's classmates sure were loud, though...

"God, I *hate* my boyfriend!"

I could hear the girls talking all the way from where I was sitting. Since one of them raised her voice, it seemed like the others had gotten louder to match; I could hear their entire conversation now.

"All he wants to do on our days off is hang out at home!"

"What? That sounds great! I'm *so* jealous. I'd love that!"

"It sucks! As soon as we're alone, he gets all clingy with me. It's super annoying!"

"For real? That just means he loves you. Now you're just showing off!"

"I'm *not*! It's summer, so it's hot and sweaty, and it ruins my makeup!"

"Oh, I get you."

"I gotta keep my makeup on to keep my standards up, y'know? So I don't want him all over me like that. What about you, Kohinata-san? You find it annoying when your boyfriend's too clingy?"

Iroha turned around at the mention of her name.

"Me? Hmm... I mean, his *face* is annoying, but I'd say I'm the one who's too clingy."

She was ready with a response in no time at all. It was completely natural too, even though she hadn't been a part of the conversation before then.

"You finally admit it, huh? This whole time you've been telling us you don't have a boyfriend. Or did you finally get lucky over the summer?" One of the girls elbowed Iroha in the ribs.

"You're actually right." Iroha looked away with a suggestive smile before pulling out her phone. "I'll show you my boyfriend. Get a load of this!"

"Hey, that's Tomaty-kun!"

"LOL! Dammit though, you're still playing dumb, huh?" One of the girls started massaging Iroha's shoulders playfully.

"Aha ha ha! Boyfriends don't just grow on trees, you know! And I don't even have a crush on anyone!" Iroha denied it outright.

"'Boyfriends don't grow on trees.' They would for *you*! You're like some rich girl who doesn't know how much us peasants suffer. You're gonna regret it if you don't find someone while you're young!"

"Hey, we're the same age! Isn't society past the point of romance being everything?"

That was my kouhai. A perfectly popular superwoman. Her position meant one misstep could invite all sorts of hate, but she used just the right amount of humor in her conversation to make disliking

her difficult.

Still, she had some nerve, joking about that sort of stuff in a conversation about annoying, overly clingy people. If these girls could see what Iroha was really like when she was in my room, they'd faint on the spot.

Uh.

My gaze just met Iroha's. But only for a split second; after that she looked away and went right back to talking with her classmates.

Huh?

What was that?

I'd suddenly felt something like a gloomy thorn prodding at my chest. Maybe it was arrhythmia, young as I was. I decided to look up the symptoms when I got home. It was always better to be safe than sorry.

"No..."

A sad murmur came from behind the nearby tree.

"Hm? Something wrong, Mashiro?"

"I never knew... It was so obvious... How come I never noticed before?" Mashiro's voice was trembling, and her eyes were wide with shock.

"H-Hey. What are you talking about?" I asked, unsure if that was a question I should be asking.

She looked like an explorer who'd just made an incredibly disturbing discovery by accessing a strange world hidden on the flip side of ours. The next words that came from between her ghostly pale lips were spoken as though they would be her last.

"Sweating...ruins your makeup... Can that really be true?"

It was a line that hardly matched the dramatic way in which it was delivered. So why had she worked up to it like it was a groundbreaking realization? It was the kind of line so ordinary that an author wouldn't even bother to include it in their novel. The only writer who'd bother adding a detail like that would be one who's being paid by the page, so they end up padding out the manuscript unnecessarily.

Sorry, Makigai-sensei. Back when I was helping you out, I wrote a ton of unneeded dialogue like that. So it's not like I can talk. Even though I wasn't a writer, I could tell how difficult writing it was.

Anyway. Mashiro.

"Isn't that common sense? How did you not know?"

"H-How *could* I know? I was a shut-in until half a year ago. You can't expect that much from me!"

"But you wear makeup every day. I thought you'd know all about that sort of thing."

"I learned from watching beauty gurus and searching up tips

online. I don't have much actual knowledge; it's all superficial..."

"Wait, you mean you can get your makeup that good all from learning stuff on the internet? Modern society sure is terrifying."

"But if makeup runs off with sweat, then I need to make sure to check myself in the mirror more often... No way. Does that mean all this time, my makeup might've been messed up without me realizing it?!"

Each word she spoke caused another milliliter of sweat to run down her face.

"A-And I'm nervous right now, so I'm sweating! I-I'm gonna go fix my makeup!"

"Ah! Hey, Mashiro! Where are you going?!"

"Don't make me say it, creep!"

The bathroom then.

There wasn't anything else for me to say now that I'd worked it out, so all I could really do was stand there and watch Mashiro race away. I wasn't worried about losing track of her, since we both had our phones. Technology truly was something to be thankful for.

Now I just needed to decide how to kill time until she came back.

"Oh, right. I need to do the announcement."

I was of course talking about Kokuryuuin Kugetsu, the new character the Alliance was planning to release. The one we all had high hopes for. Her lines had been recorded without incident, and I'd checked that her implementation was going along as scheduled, so there was no need to hold back on the announcement.

I opened up LIME and sent a message to Ozu, who was probably at home drowning in a paradise of 2D girls right about now.

AKI: Could I ask you to do the pop-up for Kokuryuuin Kugetsu's announcement?

OZ: Sure. I'll have it sent to each user depending on their ID.

His reply came in a matter of seconds.

It didn't matter when I messaged him; the "read" mark would come up immediately, and his reply would come moments later. It got me wondering when he actually slept.

He was a super talented engineer, so maybe he'd set up some kind of AI to reply automatically. It sounded a little science-fictiony, but I could well believe it. Such was the power of the Alliance's personal Tony Stark, also known as Kohinata Ozuma.

Because the servers we were renting for *Koyagi* were weak, we had to stagger our rollout of the announcement. *Koyagi* was more popular than we'd initially expected, and it was getting to the point

that, if we didn't upgrade our servers soon, we'd be in trouble.

I was still searching for some cost-effective servers to rent, but so far hadn't found anything good enough.

It was just as these thoughts were drifting through my head that I spotted it.

"Hm?"

It was right next to my butt. There, on the bench. A familiar accessory case. The one Mashiro had been holding just a second ago.

Don't tell me she left this behind...

I didn't like where this was going, so I put my hand in...no, on top of the case (because I didn't want to invade her privacy) and felt around. The first thing I felt was sort of squishy. That was probably her purse, which was apparently bottomless with how much money it had produced at the various stalls tonight. There was also something hard and rectangular.

I didn't need to look inside to know it was her phone.

"She really ran off empty-handed? Now I don't have any way to contact her."

Also, thinking about it now...since she hadn't planned on fixing her makeup at some point, then she must not have brought a cosmetics pouch with her either. And if she went to the bathroom without anything, then how exactly did she plan to fix her makeup?

"She got way overexcited!"

I grabbed her case and stood up in a hurry, then dove back through the crowds in search of Mashiro.

So how did that work out for me? Well...

"I'm lost."

Clearly, I also got way overexcited.

The first rule of being separated: if one of you is on the move, the other one must stay in place.

If I had been as levelheaded as usual, I wouldn't have made such a basic error. Did that mean I'd been panicking as much as Mashiro?

No matter where I looked, there were people, people, and more people. Since the fireworks were due to start soon, the crowds were getting denser too. I tried to retrace my steps, but I ended up on a totally different path, unable to even find my way back to the bench.

This had to be the least efficient environment this could've happened in, for god's sake. But Mashiro wasn't around to hear my complaints, and there was nothing more fruitless than pointless anger, so I gave in and went around the stalls instead, asking them where the bathrooms were.

It was as I was wandering around that I felt a tap on my shoulder.

“Hey, kid. You find her yet?” I heard an elderly man ask behind me.

“No, there’s still no sign of her...”

Thinking it was one of the stallholders I’d spoken to, I turned around with a polite smile plastered on my face.

Wait, that’s weird. I only asked where the bathrooms were. I didn’t say anything about looking for someone.

“Boo.”

I’d turned around before that doubt crossed my mind, only to find an annoying face waiting for me with its tongue poked out, ready for me to jump.

“You— Wha?!”

“That was a great reaction! Ten out of ten! Here’s your prize. Some cotton candy!”

“No thanks. I just had some.”

“Shame! Might wanna get checked out for diabetes, though, eating so much sweet cotton candy when you’re already on a sweet date with your girlfriend. But it’s fine. I’ll just be taking your calories then... Aumph!”



As I'm sure you've worked out by now, the girl happily stuffing her cheeks with cotton candy right in front of me was my friend's little sister, Kohinata Iroha. That male voice from before must have been her doing some acting.

Iroha could use her voice to transcend age or gender, which was exactly why she was our Alliance's distinguished voice actor responsible for all of *Koyagi*'s characters. Distinguished in her acting, maybe not so much in other ways.

"What happened to your friends?"

"You mean the girls in my class?"

"Why did you rephrase that?"

"Eh, I just saw something interesting, and we ended up getting separated," she said, ignoring my question as though it didn't concern her in the least.

Those girls were nowhere to be seen, but Iroha didn't look particularly lonely being by herself.

"What about you, Senpai? Did you have a fight with Mashiro? You've been wandering around by yourself for a while now."

"Does that mean you've been watching me? Since when?"

"For a pretty long time now! I spotted you and I was wondering what you were doing."

"You should've come and talked to me the second you saw me."

"I couldn't; I was surrounded by the girls in my class then. Heh heh." Iroha scratched at the back of her head with an awkward grin.

But that means...

"Wait, don't tell me you got separated from your friends because you got too distracted watching me?"

"Whoa, you're pretty sharp! That means you're ready to make up for what you did, right?"

"No. You're the one who got distracted. Why should I clean up after you?"

"What? You had me totally hooked on you, and now you're refusing to accept responsibility? How cruel! Look how big my belly's gotten too!"

"Don't say stuff like that so loudly in public! Your belly's only big 'cause you ate too much from all the stalls!"

"By the way, I'm one of those people who can eat anything and not get fat, so actually my waist's pretty trim right now!"

"Which takes your lie count up to a hundred. Stop spreading fake news."

"Ack! Hey! Don't do that when I'm wearing my hair up!" Iroha grumbled huffily, holding her head where I'd karate-chopped it.

Oops!

“Sorry. I gotta be more careful around girls who put effort into their appearance...”

“You got that right! So don’t... Hey, wait a second. You’re not being sarcastic!”

“I only just learned about the importance of stuff like that.”

That was the whole reason Mashiro and I got separated. If she hadn’t gone to fix her makeup, and I hadn’t chased after her to tell her she’d left her stuff behind, I would probably know where the hell I was right now.

Iroha had her arms folded and was nodding sagaciously while I explained.

“You’re normally so smart, Senpai, but now and then you can be awful dumb!”

“What did you call me?! Wait, actually, I think Sumire-sensei was saying something similar recently. Does that mean...I really *am* a moron?”

I could brush off one person saying it, but when it was two, I was suddenly up against majority rule. Those two were the ones speaking a more objective truth.

There was always the explanation that my brainpower had started rotting away because I was unconsciously starting to enjoy my fake date with Mashiro. I’d let my guard down, tried my hand at something where I had very little experience, and as a result I’d messed up completely. I guess that just means my base specs weren’t good enough for this.

I remembered Iroha telling me not to be so self-critical when we had been at the beach together. I’d decided then to have more confidence in my position within the Alliance, assured that I was allowed that much.

Even then, I suddenly felt like there was some invisible deity watching me mess up with all this love, youth, and relationship stuff, and was now trying to remind me that I’d need to push myself to my mortal limits if I ever wanted to attain adequacy when it came to these things.

I decided I would take some time to work on my skills pertaining to love and youth from now on. As long as it didn’t negatively affect my other stats. Or my work with the Alliance.

“But it’s okay! Having all those different sides to you is what makes you cute!”

“You saying that while looking down at me like that is gonna make me mad.”

“Aha ha ha! Your grumpy face is cute too! Poke, poke! Poke, poke, poke!”

Iroha started poking my face, clearly over the moon. It was

annoying, but when I likened her actions to that of a playful puppy, I could start to see the cuteness in them. It really would be a shame if I was the only one who was aware of this side of her. It'd be a lost opportunity for society at large. Inefficient.

Iroha's potential larger-than-life impact on society aside, I found myself wishing again that she could have a true best friend. Someone she could be open and annoying with, and laugh with as much as she wanted.

"Hmm. Anyway, we can't just leave her when she left her phone behind and we don't know where she is. It's not like we're far from home, though, so worst-case scenario, I guess we could just meet up back at the apartment building."

"I guess, but I don't really like the idea of my girlfriend being all lost and lonely by herself."

"Huh. That's unexpectedly proper of you, Senpai."

"Well, I'm trying to convince my uncle that we're serious right now, so. I still have no clue where he's put his spies, though."

"You're worried they'll see us together, right?" Iroha giggled, conspiratorial.

"But looking for Mashiro together makes for a good excuse, right?"

"*Right!*"

I wasn't sure about the strange stress she put on the word, but at least she seemed to be having fun. I guess even though she'd lost her friends, the surrounding summer festival was enough to make up for it. It wasn't like we were in some seedy neighborhood, so like Iroha alluded to earlier, it wasn't as serious a situation as all that. I could understand why Iroha, who seemed to like me to some degree at least, was a little excited to be doing something like this together.

When I had turned down Iroha's invitation the other day, I honestly felt a little guilty about it. It felt like I was coldly rejecting an excitable puppy with a wagging tail which just wanted to play with me. But right now, I was feeling just a little less bad about it.

I didn't have time to enjoy the festival with Iroha, though. There was no way I was leaving Mashiro out there by herself.

Iroha and I had been hurrying around the festival for a few minutes now, searching for Iroha's classmates and Mashiro. We found what looked to be the bathrooms, but Mashiro wasn't there. Nor was she at the bench where we'd originally split up. I wondered if she'd gotten mad and went home. Realistically speaking, it was possible...

"We haven't had any luck, huh?"

"I wonder where she's gone," Iroha said. "D'you think she dumped you and went back home?"

"I don't think so. She was the one who came up with this whole

date plan in the first place.”

“Yeah, but you disappeared from your post and ended up getting lost. Anybody’d be hellra mad if they came back and you weren’t here,” Iroha said, smacking her water balloons against my arm.

“Ngh... You’re right,” I grumbled.

Even when we were having a normal conversation, she didn’t let up on the whole annoying thing, huh? She was consistent, I’d give her that much.

“This is Mashiro-senpai we’re talking about, though. It’d take more than this for her to give up on you.”

“What makes you so sure?”

“Um... Female intuition, I guess!”

“So it’s a total shot in the dark. Got it.”

“Anyway! All we can really do is be super patient and keep looking. This is your beloved girlfriend we’re talking about, so we gotta find her as quickly as we can!” Iroha tugged at my yukata without giving me time to protest.

“Yeah. Let’s keep it up a little longer.” I started to follow her.

After that, I was suddenly confronted with the fact that, when it came to teenage matters, my so-called objective point of view was fatally warped. Because, objectively speaking, there was only one way you could interpret how Iroha and I were behaving around each other.

“Ah! Kohinata’s on a date with her boyfriend!”

That’s what I’m talking about. That I failed to realize there was a high risk of us being seen like that was a grave mistake.

The second I heard that voice, I swore inwardly and turned around. There I found a sociable-looking girl whose brown hair was curled neatly at the ends. Her yukata seemed to profess a preference for fashion rather than tradition; it reminded me of those colorful drinks served by fast food places in the summer months.

Her mouth was opening and closing wordlessly as she pointed at us.

I recognized this girl. I’d met her in the library when I was stalking Iroha with permission. This girl had been stalking her *without* permission. I think her name was Tomosaka Sasara.

Next to her stood an incredibly brawny guy who I assumed was her boyfriend. He was tall, handsome, his hair was brown, and his ears were pierced. Around his neck hung a silver skull-shaped necklace, and his fingers were adorned with thick and eye-catching (but cheap-looking) rings. He wasn’t in a yukata. Instead, his clothes were casual and fashionable. They also had a skull pattern.

Since our school was for students who wanted to go on to college, I didn’t see many delinquents like I used to in junior high school, but this guy looked like one in every sense of the word. Someone who

enjoyed partying over studying. Judging from his build and his facial features, he was probably either in college or his last year of high school. At the very least, he didn't look younger than me.

Honestly speaking, they looked like your stereotypical couple made up of two popular kids.

"Guh."

It was clear from Iroha's grunt that she wasn't happy about running into Sasara. It was quiet, though, so I doubted Sasara heard her. I glanced at Iroha beside me. She was trying to rearrange her features into a polite smile, but that smile was a little stiff.

"T-Tomosaka-san. What a coincidence seeing you here."

"A coincidence? Not really, since it's our town's summer festival. Anyway, I've seen you now! I saw everything! You're here with a *boy*! I was totally right!"

"A boy? Um, well, Senpai and I don't have that sort of relationship, you know."

"Huh? You really think you can talk yourself outta this one?" Sasara smirked, leaning forward to study Iroha's reaction.

"Um..." Iroha averted her gaze.

She clearly wasn't her usual self right now. Usually, she'd be playing up the whole couple thing to make me feel awkward. Instead, she was denying it, trying to let the topic slip past without aggravating it further. *She* was the one feeling awkward. Iroha, of all people.

Thinking about it now, she'd been firm on the fact that she was single back when she was helping prepare for the culture festival. But before that, when she came to my classroom, she'd boldly declared (falsely) that we were dating, so I'd always assumed that she was prepared to pretend we were an item as much as she needed to, as long as it would put me in an awkward spot.

Maybe Iroha had decided that it was fine for that sort of rumor to spread through the second years, but not the first years. Or maybe she didn't mind the joke at first, but somewhere along the line something had changed inside her that meant she couldn't keep it up.

Whichever it was, she didn't seem to want us to be seen as a couple right now, and it was making things difficult for her.

Guess I'll help her out.

"Iroha's telling the truth. I'm not her boyfriend, and she's not my girlfriend."

"Give it up already! Look how close the two of...you...are?"

What started as a guffaw ended up getting gradually huskier. And then her smile faded.

"H-Hey! You're that pretentious stalker who thinks you're better than me just because you're a grade higher!"

“That’s not a very nice way to remember someone.”

“Oooh. I didn’t realize you were Kohinata’s boyfriend. So *that’s* why you were in the library.”

“Close, but no cigar. Your answer’s close, but your method’s off.”

“Quit it already! You’re making me remember my careless mistake... If it weren’t for that, I’d be within inches of Kohinata right now!”

I seemed to have unearthed some sort of trauma with my comment. Sasara seemed pretty unstable, emotionally speaking. Which made her kind of interesting, actually.

“Hmph! It’s not like I care about some dumb test grade anyway. Not right now!” Sasara went from freaking out to standing up straight and looking down at Iroha and me scornfully. “You *can* judge a girl by the kind of man she’s with, y’know! Your basic pretentious stalker-senpai isn’t even good enough to kiss the ground my Charo walks on!”

Sasara jerked her chin in the direction of the guy next to her.

What’s a Charo? Oh, wait, I guess that’s his name. Sounds like he belongs in a boyband.

Normies really did inhabit a different world if they were now being named like show business stars. Compare myself objectively to this beefcake chad and yep, admittedly, I wasn’t good enough to kiss the ground he stood on.

Surprisingly, Iroha had a pretty strong reaction to Sasara’s words.

“Hey. Don’t you think that’s a little rude, when you don’t even know him?” Iroha maintained her honor-student smile, but her cheeks were twitching now, and there was an explosive tension crackling in the air.

Sasara grinned back at her. “Sorry, sweetie! It’s not nice when someone talks trash about your boyfriend, is it? That’s why I’m saying, be mindful of the sort of guys you hang out with! I’m doing you a favor here. I’m *warning* you, because I wouldn’t want you to ruin your perfect reputation.”

“Don’t you get it? I’m telling you it’s none of your business! Who I choose to walk around with has got nothing to do with you.”

“Excuse me? Look, I’m just worried that he’s taking advantage of your kindness—I mean! I mean I don’t want the girl who’s better than me, even if it is only academically speaking, going out with some bottom-of-the-barrel guy!”

I was right. She was interesting. Weird, and funny. I may have discovered a new breed of tsundere: one who tried to cover up any accidental slips of sweetness or kindness at the speed of light. One whose tsundereism was peppered with impulsiveness and an annoying nature. I’d call her the baka-tsundere.

It’d be an interesting concept to use for a new character, but its

complicated human nature might be a little difficult for our users to swallow. Coming up with her lines alone sounded difficult enough.

I found myself thinking the same thing I did about Canary. How could real people walk around just fine when on the inside they were way more fleshed out than any fictional character out there?

“Who are you calling bottom of the barrel? Senpai’s super kind, *and* he’s a genius, *and* he’s one of the best guys you’ll ever meet!”

The feud between Iroha and Sasara was still going on.

For some reason, Sasara’s comments had provoked Iroha to the extent that she was now fighting back. It was more embarrassing than pleasing to be praised so highly in front of a practical stranger, and really I just wanted her to stop. But Iroha showed no signs of backing down, despite my silent wishes.

“How? You can tell he’s just some dork by looking at him!” Sasara said. “He’s clearly one of those guys that’s still obsessed with manga, games, and anime, even though he should’ve grown out of that stuff by now.”

“You got it!” I snapped my fingers. Her guess was so completely on the mark, I was reacting before I knew it.

“Stay outta this!”

“Just keep quiet, Senpai!”

But I was shut down from both sides. They were talking about me, so I felt like I had the right to say something... Guess I was wrong...

Sasara probably thought she was insulting me, but the way I saw it, everything she said was the objective truth, so I wasn’t mad or even that annoyed. It was actually Iroha who was getting angry about it, which was kind of unexpected. I was used to being treated as part of the background in my class, so Sasara’s words were actually pretty fair, considering she was actually recognizing my existence.

Speaking of the background, it was then that Tomosaka Sasara’s boyfriend (or who I assumed was her boyfriend) spoke for the first time.

“Hey, leave it there, yeah? You’re going way too far, sis,” he said.

“Shut it. When did I say you could speak— Aah!” Sasara suddenly let out a scream like an uprooted mandrake—but Iroha and I were too busy thinking over the meaning of her words to care.

“He called her ‘sis,’ right?”

“He totally called her ‘sis.’”

As Iroha and I stared, Charo (who was definitely not Sasara’s boyfriend) grinned and lifted a friendly hand.

“Sorry, I kinda missed the chance to introduce myself. I’m Tomosaka Chatarou, Sasara’s younger brother. She’s given me an annoying nickname, but it’s *cha* as in tea, and *tarou* as in Momotarou—so I’m Japanese through and through.”

“A pleasure to meet you.” I returned his handshake with a friendly greeting, because first impressions count. His hands were huge. Maybe he played baseball. “If you’re her younger brother... No way, does that mean you’re in junior high school?”

“Yeah. Second year.”

“Huh. You don’t look it at all.” I couldn’t help being impressed.

“Yeah, I get that a lot. Some kids are jealous, but honestly, it’s kinda embarrassing. I gotta dress like this, otherwise I look like some grown-up dummy dressing like a kid and people laugh at me.” Chatarou grinned awkwardly, showing me his jangly silver necklace.

Now that I looked at his outfit again, I could see the hints that he was a middle schooler in some of his choices. Like the skulls, for instance.

“Charo! I told you not to call me ‘sis’ when we’re out! You just told them everything!”

“Hey! Cram it, grandma. I didn’t even wanna come here. I’m only here ‘cause you bribed me with money.”

“Wh-Who’re you calling grandma? You’re just a snot-nosed kid! And I gave you the money, didn’t I? So act like I told you to!”

“Well, I was gonna, but then you started insulting manga, games, and anime and it ticked me off, because I have mad respect for that kinda stuff!”

“Gimme back my money then! Gimme back the thousand yen!”

What we were witnessing was a real case of sibling rivalry, and Iroha and I were totally excluded. I bet we were thinking the exact same thing.

“You asked your brother to pretend to be your boyfriend?” Iroha’s face was practically blue as she grimaced and stepped back. “Th-This is why you didn’t come to the festival with everyone else? Seriously?”

“I-It’s not like I lied, okay?! All I said was that I was going to the festival with a good-looking guy! And it’s true!” Sasara said quickly.

“Yeah, but he didn’t even want to come and you paid him. That’s kind of embarrassing, don’t you think?” Iroha’s tone was steadily rising in confidence.

Sasara could only let out a frustrated groan, having no words left to respond.

“Sasara likes to show off, see. She probably didn’t want everyone in her class to know she’s single.”

“**GAAAAH!** Can you *please* shut up?!”

“You shut up, grandma! It’s not my fault you dunno how to lie! Wait...” Chatarou brushed off his sister, who was clinging to him. The light in his eye changed suddenly, like he’d just noticed something, and then he thrust his hand into his pocket. He took out his phone and checked the screen. “Oh, hey! *Koyagi’s* getting an update! Man, this

new character looks like she's gonna be really good!"

A jolt ran through Iroha and me at the same time. We quickly made eye contact and began to mouth to each other.

"He's talking about Kokuryuuin Kugetsu, right?"

"Yeah, I think so. I just asked Ozu to send out the notifications. This guy probably just got his."

"So this guy's one of our players! In the flesh!"

"We're actually meeting one! Dammit, now I feel kinda nervous..."

After breaking through a million downloads, the number kept climbing, and now *Koyagi* was approaching two million users. While those numbers were a real achievement for an independent dev team like us with no advertising budget, it was nothing compared to the mobile gaming market as a whole.

Finding our fans online was easy, but I had never come across an actual player at school or in town. Save for those of us who worked on the game, of course.

Our players really do exist...

It seemed like a stupid thought to have after all this time, but it was hard to appreciate that our game was actually that popular just by reading comments online. Even though I understood that each of our players was a real human being, I often found myself doubting whether they might be AI or bots instead. Maybe that was just me.

"Ah! You're playing that game again? You need to stop! It makes you look like a total nerd."

"Huh?! This is like my favorite game ever. You insult it, and I'm gonna crush your bones!"

And we were back with the sibling rivalry. At this point, I couldn't care less about Sasara's insults.

"Your favorite game ever..."

Warmth spread through my chest. Here was a player praising *Koyagi* right in front of me.

Wait. I mean yeah, I was happy—but I couldn't let myself get bigheaded over a single piece of praise. I had to stay humble. Levelheaded. Stay cool, and take in his opinion with—

"Hey, you interested, Senpai?" Chatarou asked.

"Huh? Uh, yeah..." That much wasn't a lie. I was interested...in what our users had to say about the game, at least. "I was just wondering what you like about it."

"Oh, I'm crazy glad you asked! Y'know, once I start, I won't be able to stop..."

I knew what that meant. When a nerd got excited over something, they'd start talking at a rapid speed and go on and on. Murasaki Shikibu-sensei did it a lot.

"Okay, I'm gonna start with how the game feels and its world. I

first downloaded it 'cause I heard Makigai Namako-sensei, that popular author, wrote the scenarios! And yeah, his world's just as deep and engrossing as ever. The whole thing starts off all confined to this one mansion right, but then the story twists and turns and gets way bigger, and it's so awesome!"

So he'd chosen to start with the scenario and worldbuilding. That was the usual starting point which drew light users into *Koyagi*.

"And then you've got Murasaki Shikibu-sensei's artwork. It's incredible! I never heard of her before, but I was an instant fan! She makes the super cute characters like, I dunno, weirdly realistic? I think it's what you'd call 'aesthetic.' Just looking at them makes me feel all warm, like they're really there. Like, they're way too precious!"

His next topic was the artwork. The CGs and character designs. It was likely instinct, rather than any logical reason, that had him enamored by the charm of Murasaki Shikibu-sensei's work.

"And the programmer, OZ-san! Like, his technical skills have gotta be world-class! You've got the exploration sequences in the mansion that change in real time, and then the detailed events that are different depending on your relationship with each character, like, they really know how to please the players. The variation in the creepy graphics and stuff hits all the right spots, and the game's always getting updated so it never gets boring!"

Then he got to the programming and his thoughts about the game mechanics. The whole reason I wanted to make a game in the first place was to show off Ozu's talents to the world, but after release, discussion about that aspect of the game on social media was rare. It had frustrated me, but this guy was really giving it the praise it deserved.

"Then there's the voice acting. There's seriously some Oscar-level talent in there! Hnngh! The voices match the characters so *perfectly*, like, they're so good I could listen to them a hundred times over! Especially when the heroines start confessing their feelings it's like, I really feel it in my heart, y'know! It takes me to another world, I swear, like I could die then and there and not realize it. The voice actors' identities are secret, but there's some *real* talent there. A lot of people online say it's a group of pro voice actors working anonymously, but even the hardcore voice-actor fans haven't been able to find a match with any famous talent, so I was thinking, what if it's just one voice actor who hasn't had their break yet but is bound to be a star when the time comes?!"

He was now approaching the end and coming to his thoughts on the voice acting—and he somehow hit the nail on the head without a shred of evidence.

“Oh, but then there’s Aki, the guy who brings all these insanely amazing people together and leads them. He’s literally the guy I respect most in the world right now!”

He topped things off with the group’s leader, who by all rights couldn’t hold up next to the four exceptional talents already mentioned. Compared to them, he wasn’t even worth mentioning; he was more a figurehead than anything.

Yet this guy’s pitch went up an octave as he spoke about this guy with so much excitement it made me flinch.

“O-Oh, really?”

“He got Murasaki Shikibu-sensei, a fantastic artist no publishing or gaming company ever discovered; got OZ-san from who-knows-where; convinced *the* Makigai Namako-sensei to join him; uncovered a hidden voice talent that not even the biggest nerds can identify; *and* brought them all together to make a game on top of that! That’s not something just anyone can do. I’m with the guys who think it’s a big-shot anime producer doing this under a different name as a hobby, but honestly I have no clue who it might be!”

“Right.”

He’s right in front of you, dude.

“Either way, I’m mega grateful to him for making such an awesome game. That’s never gonna change no matter who it is!”

“Yeah. I mean. Chatarou-kun. You know, you seem like a great guy.”

“Senpai?!” Chatarou gawked. “What’s the matter?!”

Summer festival.

A warmth spreading through my heart.

The words of a fan.

—A haiku by Akiteru.

I always thought listening to our users was a good idea, as long as I didn’t let it lead to inefficiencies. For example, taking on too many of the fans’ ideas could lead to overload and kill my motivation. On the other hand, too much praise might cause me to become bigheaded. That was why I kept my communication with fans modest, and used their feedback for reference purposes only.

But to have this guy gush over our game right in front of me? How could I *not* be happy?

“Heh. Heh heh...”

While I basked in the glow of his praise, Iroha’s mouth twitched as she stood next to me. She seemed on the brink of breaking out of her honor-student composure, like she wanted to allow a smug smile to bloom and let out a full on laugh, but she just about managed to keep it together. She settled with a grin.

“Your brother’s a really good kid,” she told Sasara. “Unlike you.”

“Excuse me?! What’s so good about him? He just went full-on nerd!”

“What, you don’t get it? People who are able to share their positive feelings about something are super likable. Way more likable than people who pick fights all the time and insult others over the tiniest things.”

“Grrr...” Sasara trembled, her voice choked with frustration.

Iroha watched her with a hint of smugness in her eyes. I hadn’t realized Iroha was capable of confronting other girls her own age like this. It was my first time seeing it, and honestly, I was surprised.

“You’re such an idiot, Charo! You let Kohinata get one up on me!”

“How’s that my fault?! You’re the one who dragged me here!”

“Whatever. Just don’t think I’m gonna forget this, Kohinata!”

“Sasara! Watch where you’re going, or you’ll—”

“Gaah! Ah! I-I’m sorry! I’m so sorry! I totally wasn’t looking. No, it’s my fault! My bad!”

Sasara had tried to hurry away with her index finger pointed squarely at Iroha, and she’d ended up walking into somebody and apologizing profusely. Chatarou sighed and slapped a hand to his face.

I really felt for the guy. Having to keep an eye on a burdensome sister day in and day out was tough for sure.

“I’m gonna head off too, to make sure she doesn’t get lost,” Chatarou said. “Uh, by the way, what was your name, Senpai? I know you’re Kohinata-senpai, ’cause Sasara’s always going on about you.”

“Yup! I’m Kohinata Iroha. And this is my senpai—”

“Ooboshi Akiteru.”

“Ooboshi-senpai! Got it! I go to Kouzai Junior High nearby, so let’s talk about games again next time we meet. I wanna know what you two think about *Koyagi* too!”

“R-Right. See you.”

I knew enough about *Koyagi* to talk for a full three days, but I had no intention of sharing that information with him, so I kept my response vague. I felt like talking to him for too long would be an immense waste of time, but I didn’t mind giving him a couple hours if the opportunity came along.

“How long are you gonna just stand there, brat? We’re going!”

“Shut it, grandma! I’m coming already!”

The siblings walked away, their loud rivalry showing no signs of abating.

I raised my hand in farewell. Once they were gone, Iroha smiled sweetly and poked her tongue out.

“So long! Hope we never see you again!”

“There’s gotta be some kinda skill to saying something so rude while smiling so nicely.”

“Duh! I am gonna be a huge voice acting star, you know!” Iroha declared, puffing her chest out proudly.

“Don’t get ahead of yourself now.”

I knew she’d taken on board what Chatarou had said, so I needed to make sure she stayed grounded. I understood how she felt, but pride was the sweetest poison. For the sake of the Alliance’s future, she couldn’t be seduced by the adoring fan who stood right in front of us and gave us so many of his super helpful thoughts on every single thing while sounding so stoked (Eee! I hope he comes back and tells us all over again!) that— Hold up, what was that? I need to chill!



Okay, take a deep breath, and let's get back to the important stuff.

Those siblings were like a whirlwind in more ways than one.

I could barely believe Sasara had turned down the invitation in their class's group chat just so she could have her brother pose as her boyfriend. Just why she thought that was a good idea was beyond me, but I guess people had all sorts of mysterious decision-making processes in this world.

Wait. Mashiro and I were also pretending to be a couple. Maybe what we were doing would look just as ridiculous from an outsider's perspective.

Best not to think too hard about it. There are times when it's useful to leave a topic unprobed. Yup.

"You and that Tomosaka girl don't get along, I take it?"

"Uh... Not really, I guess."

"I didn't realize you could get so argumentative with your classmates."

"I don't really like to, seeing how I'm supposed to be an honor student and everything, but she just brings out the worst in me." Iroha frowned, as though she wasn't sure of her own feelings on the matter. "At school, I'm always doing my best to keep enough distance from people that I don't upset anyone, no matter who they are, though I'm careful to be polite too. But she just comes guns blazing whenever she wants. Like she'll come to me without me doing a thing, and it's kinda hard to deal with."

"Oh, I totally sympathize."

"Is there some kinda deeper meaning to that, or am I imagining things?"

"It's not deep at all. That's how you are to me."

"*What?! I'm not like her! She's just annoying! I'm your super adorable little sister!*"

"You're not *my* little sister, you're my *friend's* little sister." I corrected her right away. That one extra word made a huge difference, and I'd like her to remember that.

"But yeah, you see what I mean? I just don't wanna get involved with her, if I'm completely honest."

"Right."

I realized something while studying Iroha's expression from beside her. She *looked* mad, but there was a softness to it all. It was Tomosaka Sasara, who clashed with Iroha, that most got her perfectly inoffensive honor-student mask to slip. That fact might prove useful in the effort to find Iroha a best friend.

Maybe there were possibilities to be found in someone that Iroha really didn't get along with, as well as those she had a good

relationship with. The opposite of “like” is “indifference.” It isn’t “hate.”

“Ah! There you are, Kohinata-san! We were looking for you forever. We thought you were gone like the zaibatsu!”

Not long after we split off from the Tomosaka siblings, a shrill voice reached my ears from above the din of the festival. I turned and spotted Iroha’s classmates, who were waving their arms in the air as they approached us.

By the way, the zaibatsu were a kind of business conglomerate, all of which were dissolved after World War II. How well these girls knew their history was uncertain, but it was interesting to see that there might still be nuggets of information hidden within teenage slang.

It was kind of crazy how detached I was from other people around my age.

“Hi, guys! Sorry for getting separated!” Iroha’s tone was light as she bounced up to reunite with her classmates.

They clapped their hands together and squealed, looking like the epitome of popular high school girls. It was almost blinding to me, someone who preferred to live his life in the shadows.

“Hey, who’s this?”

“He’s my senpai. We were in a club together in junior high school. I happened to bump into him, so we started reminiscing about old times!”

“Ooh, is that right? ‘Sup, Senpai-san!”

“H-Hello.”

I knew my reply was a little awkward, even for me. But you couldn’t blame me. I barely had any experience of sociable girls wanting to talk to me. I mean, she was literally just like “sup” out of nowhere, with no reservations! And that’s why teenage girls are terrifying.

“He’s not your boyfriend or anything right, Kohinata-san?”

“Quit teasing me! He is *not*. I told you. I don’t have a boyfriend.”

“Didn’t think so!”

“Yeah...”

It took that little convincing?! Not that I wanted them to think I was Iroha’s boyfriend, but they were basically saying that she was objectively out of my league. Anyone’d be hurt by that.

“Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for your patience! The fireworks show will begin shortly.”

A flowing voice rang out far above our heads. It was an announcement coming through the speakers set up around the grounds.

The girls began to tweet like baby birds calling back to their

parents.

“Wanna go see the fireworks?”

“Waiting for so long’s been, like, killing me! I can’t even explain how hyped I am!”

“Senpai-san, wanna tack with us?!”

Was she talking to me? It sounded so completely different to the Japanese I knew that I found myself speechless. I was breaking out in a cold sweat, and in the end all I managed was an inoffensive smile. Iroha spotted my struggles, and she came to whisper covertly in my ear.

“She’s asking if you wanna go with us to see the fireworks!”

“That’s what that means?”

So it was an invitation. I was just some guy in the year above; she didn’t even know me. Could it be that most social girls were actually kind, and my problem was just that I didn’t understand them?

Or maybe it was proof that she was easy, and was used to inviting men to whatever.

I guess it didn’t matter which it was, since I couldn’t go anyway.

“I’m sorry. I—”

“I know. You’re worried about Mashiro-senpai, right? If you want, I’ll come—”

“No, it’s okay. You go enjoy the fireworks with your friends.”

Iroha paused. “Okay! Gotcha.”

She shot me that cheeky grin of her normal self, subtle enough that the other girls wouldn’t pick up on it, before clinging to one of them.

“He can’t! He’s meeting his girlfriend for a date soon. So don’t get in his way, okay?”

“Wh— I-Iroha!”

“You’ve got a *date*, right, Senpai?” Iroha looked at me steadily, a deeper meaning in her eyes.

Now I see what she’s getting at.

Tonight, I was a piece of shit who was pouring everything I had into making my fake date with Mashiro a success. What hope did I have of adequately being her fake boyfriend if I couldn’t even reply with a simple “yes”? I needed to work with Iroha here, for the sake of the Alliance.

“Yeah, Iroha’s right. I’m here with my girlfriend, but we got separated. I don’t want her wandering around feeling lonely. I gotta find her so we can watch the fireworks together.”

“Oh, I gotchu! Sorry for keeping you then! Man, do I feel like the densest dumdrill alive!”

“By the way, these words you’re saying... Is that really how teenage girls speak these days?”

“Wow, you’re so funny! You just gotta flap out what you feel like, y’know!”

That was where all this slang came from? Though that might be how most languages were born, which was fair enough.

Vagueness, obscurity, and ambiguity, all perfectly attuned to a kind of sensitivity that gloomy types like Mashiro and I had a hard time adapting to. Though life would probably be easier if I weren’t affected by the impenetrable walls that were our relationship, and didn’t have to worry about being “faithful.” If I didn’t have to deal with this annoying stuff, and there weren’t all these rules dictating my actions.

But it was too late to change the way I lived now, wasn’t it?

“I’ll see you later then. Be nice to Iroha—Kohinata, okay?”

“Okey-de-cokey!”

“And you make sure you look after Mashiro-senpai, okay, Senpai?”

I waved at the grinning Iroha and her smiling friend, who I was sure just made up that slang on the spot, and then set off on my lonely journey in search of Mashiro.

The fireworks would be starting before long, and Mashiro wasn’t with me yet. I looked up at the stars in the night sky, restless as they waited to be joined by a myriad of colors, and found myself wondering just what I was doing.

The days leading up to this festival had been quiet; it had been a long time since I’d been free of work like that.

Of course, there were small jobs, like preparing for the recording and designing the announcement banner and release schedule. There was my summer homework too, so by society’s standards my days had probably been “busy.” But to me, they’d been relaxing: days where I could turn off my efficiency filter for just a little bit. That’s what gave Ozu an opportunity to get through his games backlog, and Murasaki Shikibu-sensei a chance to lose herself to the *GF7* remake.

The origin for these peaceful days went back to a certain event at the beach. It was mainly to do with the week we spent at Villa Kanaria putting together our new character, Kokuryuuin Kugetsu, at top speed. A new character usually took more than two weeks, but we did it in one, which gave us a lot of leftover time. A space as white as snow in the middle of my life that was usually overwhelmed with blotches of color.

I was realizing now that I had no idea how I was supposed to use extra time like that, as I made my way upstream of the crowds.

Mashiro wasn’t here.

I had come back to the bench we'd sat at before, but she wasn't there either. I found the bathrooms, but they were deserted like hermit crab shells. The stallholders were glancing at me as I passed. I knew I must've looked pitiful walking around by myself for all this time. There was the stall where Mashiro had emptied her pockets scooping goldfish like it was a gacha game. If any of the spectators saw me now, they'd probably think she'd dumped me. Though I was actually the one who rejected her.

"Yeah... I rejected her..."

I thought about Mashiro.

To me, this fake date was something I was doing for the Alliance, but to her, it was a date with the guy who had turned her down.

What did I think when I saw Tomosaka Sasara pretending her brother was her boyfriend just to make herself look good? Didn't I think it was a little ridiculous? A little sad?

I thought back to every little thing Mashiro had done today. I let everything, right up to our time at the goldfish scooping, replay vividly in my mind. I wasn't watching them from my perspective this time, but from an objective one. From the perspective of an impartial observer.

The whole date was ridiculous, wasn't it?

Mashiro, more than anyone else, must have realized how silly—how sad—the entire thing was.

"I have my pride too, you know. I'm not good at anything, especially being happy and stuff, but even then, their words hurt..."

It was a conversation we'd had two, three months ago in the middle of a gloomy cinema. That was what Mashiro had said while clutching her knees and crying, thinking back to how she'd been bullied at her previous school. If it hadn't been for Iroha stepping in and driving her bullies away, Mashiro wouldn't have been able to move forward. She couldn't do anything by herself back then.

But the Mashiro I saw today?

When she was little, she needed help for everything. Today, I really got the feeling that she was trying to tackle every little thing by herself as it came to her.

There was a sudden bang. The first fireworks were going up, and the grounds erupted into cheers. Rainbow flecks rained down through the sky. When I was younger, those fireworks were treasures invisible from the ground. But now I didn't need to climb a tree to be able to see them.

Still, they were so high up in the night sky that I could reach and reach for them and never make it.

There was something else, wasn't there?

Something that Mashiro couldn't reach by herself even if she tried.

Maybe that was her aim today. To overcome everything, no matter how pathetic or ridiculous she looked in the process.

“Somewhere dark and a little elevated...” I murmured, remembering how I found Mashiro hidden in the movie theater of the shopping mall not long after she’d transferred to our school.

I knew where she was.

But before I could go there, I needed to come up with an answer. What could I do for her as her fake boyfriend? For Mashiro, who kept trying to move forward no matter how beat up she got on the way?

This wasn’t just about what I could do for the Alliance. This was so that I, as a man, could face the girl who was Tsukinomori Mashiro.

I thought hard, putting my brain into max efficiency mode and ran through the events of today at high speed. The result was a single spark of understanding. A shocking truth that I only just realized.

Oh. I get it now.

If I was right, then this was the only thing I could do for Mashiro now.

I pulled out my phone and made a call. Then I ran to where she should be. The place with the best view of the fireworks.

“The fireworks have already started. Are you gonna make it?”

“I’ll make it. What kind of boyfriend would I be if I didn’t?”

Chapter 8: My Friend's Little Sister and Our Fireworks!

Away from the grounds filled with excited voices stood the main shrine, deserted. Behind that shrine grew a large tree. It grew taller than the shrine itself and boasted a thick trunk and branches. It was directly opposite the crowds and the fireworks, hiding away undiscovered. But I knew that the tree's presence was reassuring. It was like a reliable ally.

We both knew that.

"I knew you'd come."

"Sorry I took so long to realize."

An extra shadowy spot, even among the shadows.

The fireworks burst, eliciting cheers from the crowd. Those noises seemed so far away, like we were inhabiting a small slice of a different world. In reality, they were only a few meters ahead.

Mashiro was waiting for me in that other world.

"You took too long. The fireworks have already started."

"Sorry. I started looking for you, but couldn't find you anywhere."

"A respectable boyfriend would've found me in a few seconds."

You've got a lot to learn. I hope you realize that."

"R-Right."

Her tone was sharp and merciless. It had been a while since she'd injected that venom right into my veins, and I was forced to grab at my chest.

But then she laughed. "Sorry. I don't know what to say at a time like this, except to be mean to you."

"You could stand to level up your communication skills a little then, though I guess I'm one to talk."

I knew just how Mashiro felt right now. When you had a poor opinion of yourself, it was much easier to find the bad in other people than the good. We weren't like Iroha, her classmates, or Tomosaka Chatarou: the type of people who praised others as easily as breathing. We were fundamentally different.

For people like Mashiro and me, it took everything we had just to focus and then finally find a single good point in someone.

Insults, criticism, and abuse. For Mashiro, those poisonous words were the easiest conversation tool to equip. For me, it would be words of logic; words that could sometimes be sharp enough to cut people's

hearts.

To put it simply, we sucked at communicating. Both me and Mashiro. The more words we strung together, the worse things got. It was like a quick fix to your makeup, something slapped together just enough to seem fashionable. They became like our patchwork mess of a fake relationship.

That was how I knew Mashiro would try to communicate with me without using words.

“Aki. You remember this tree, right?” Mashiro stroked the bark with her fingers and looked up at it.

“I do. It was the tree your brother—Mikoto—and I climbed when we were small. It was like a VIP seat. Somewhere even little kids like us could see the fireworks from.”

“Yeah. And I gave up trying to climb it. So you did too.”

“That was my bad, for not finding a vantage point you could reach without being athletic.”

“That’s not how I saw it, which is why I stopped going to the summer festival after that.”

Now that she mentioned it, that had been the last year she, Mikoto, and I had all come to the festival together.

“I avoided it because I was scared of annoying you.”

“I didn’t think you were annoying. They’re just fireworks. Missing them wasn’t gonna kill me.”

“I know. Because you’re kind.” Mashiro smiled. She must have sunk a lot of skill points in her communication skill to even utter those few words of praise. “You are kind. Kind enough to keep an eye out for someone who’s not even your friend.”

“What are you talking about? You *were* my friend. Back then, anyway—now you’re my fake girlfriend.”

“I wasn’t. Your only *equal* friendship was with Mikoto.”

Her words sounded nitpicky to me—but I couldn’t deny them either.

“I was always just your friend’s little sister. You took me along because I was your friend’s sister, not because I was me.”

“I don’t know if I would’ve been thinking that logically about it when I was a kid.”

Again, I couldn’t deny it. Because I wasn’t sure enough about what I might have been thinking at the time. If Mikoto hadn’t been there, would I have made an effort to hang out with Mashiro, a girl? I had no idea. To outright deny what she was saying would be dishonest.

“It doesn’t matter what you thought anyway. That was what *I* thought. That’s all.”

“Yeah, I see.”

Human relationships were built on assumptions. Defining your

relationship as one thing made it true. Mashiro only thought of herself as my friend's little sister, so that was what our relationship was to her. Neither my confirmation, nor denial of that were necessary.

"All of this was just to satisfy myself. A way to gain confidence in myself and to move past just being your friend's little sister. So I could pick up everything I left behind in the past. But that has nothing to do with you, Aki."

"That was partly what this fake date was about to you, huh? That's quite a lot to manage in one little date."

Mashiro laughed. "Yeah. But this is the only time I could be sure you'd be looking at me and no one else."

Was she saying that because my attention was usually on the Alliance and its members? Or did she mean that there was somebody in specific I always had my eye on?

It didn't matter which it was. Right now, the only girl I needed to pay attention to was the one in front of me: Tsukinomori Mashiro. Even if I was a piece of shit for not accepting her confession and all the while doing stuff that would keep her feelings alive. I was going to be that piece of shit right now. For her sake.

"If that's what you want. I'll only look at you tonight."

"What?"

"What I said," I said. "Come on! Get over here!"

I ran and sprang forward, planting my foot on the tree trunk next to Mashiro and jumping up before clambering onto one of the branches.

This tree seemed stupidly tall when I was a grade schooler. It took an honest effort to climb it then, but now that I was a teenager, it went much more smoothly.

"Aki... You already knew what I wanted to do?"

"Yup. Show me how strong you've gotten, Mashiro!"

"O-Okay!"

There wasn't a single reason either of us needed to climb this tree anymore. We were as tall as adults ourselves now; our view would no longer be blocked by their huge, imposing backs. It would be much more efficient to go back to the grounds and look up at the sky to watch the rest of the fireworks than to waste time climbing this tree. But efficiency didn't matter to me right now.

"I'm gonna climb up like I do it all the time! Here goes!"

Throwing her sandals to one side, Mashiro rolled up the sleeves of her yukata, and leapt. "Argh!"

She slammed her face right into the tree with enough force to kill a man. She didn't stop when she was supposed to, instead letting momentum launch her into the trunk.

"Are you okay?"

“Yes. My nose is just bleeding a little...”

“That’s not what I call ‘okay.’”

“It’s nothing, as long as I’m still alive.” Like a quietly determined yet successful businessman, Mashiro didn’t bother wiping the blood from her nose and faced down the tree again. She went at it with another grunt.

But while Mashiro might have grown stronger, it was all mentally in the end. Until recently, she’d been a total shut-in, and so her physical skills—whether arm strength, leg strength, or instincts—had all grown by a factor of zero since she was small. If physical specs could be improved by willpower alone, everybody would be a first-rate athlete.

Reality wasn’t quite so accommodating.

When Mashiro grabbed the trunk, she only ended up stripping it of bark, and when she planted her feet on it, she slipped.

I asked her whether it was okay to mess up her rental yukata this way, a question that was unfitting for two teenagers climbing a tree. Mashiro replied that she’d pay as much as she needed to for damages—something that most teenagers wouldn’t be able to promise. Neither of us seemed to fit the image of an ideal teenagehood, and yet...

“I can pull you up if you want. The fireworks’ll be over soon.”

“No. There’s no point if I don’t do this all by myself. I won’t ever be able to stand with you if I don’t get stronger!”

This was Tsukinomori Mashiro’s teenagehood.

What about me then? What should I do?

Efficiently speaking, her insistence on climbing this tree was pointless. The easiest way to get her up would be to lend her a hand—she’d get to see more fireworks that way too. Even before that, now that we were grown up, we didn’t even need a tree to watch the fireworks. We could join the crowds and enjoy them without the adults getting in our way.

So it seemed stupidly inefficient for her to keep trying to climb, and meanwhile she’d miss more and more of the fireworks. She was like a typical teenager. So obsessed with romance and fun that she was doing more harm than good. But I was doing the exact same thing by deciding to go along with it.

“Want a hint?”

“What? But then...”

“I won’t help you up. But you know what I’m like. I’m a producer. A director. When I see you going ham like that, it makes me want to direct you so much I can’t help it.”

If this was how Tsukinomori Mashiro wanted to spend her youth, then I would show her how Ooboshi Akiteru wanted to spend his. Whether she knew that was my intention or not, Mashiro nodded.

“Okay. Thanks, Aki. I mean, producer.”

“You don’t have to call me anything different. This isn’t the climax of some movie. I’m just helping you climb a tree, not guiding you on the path to becoming a top idol.”

“Hmph. You’re so mean, Aki. I was really getting into it and you ruined it. You are the *worst!*” Mashiro grumbled as she jumped—and failed—again.

“Don’t try to climb it all in one go. Study your enemy carefully. Find some footholds.”

“Footholds...” Mashiro fell quiet and observed the tree calmly. Now that she wasn’t in full-on reckless mode, her vision had sharpened. “I found one! If I put my foot here...”

Hope spurred her on.

“Gwah!”

Unfortunately, she slipped again. It looked like the perfect foothold, but the bark quickly gave way to her weight and bent beneath her.

“You want three points of support. As long as you can keep balanced on three out of four of your arms and legs, you’re good. If you put too much weight on any one place, you’ll slip off along with the bark, like you did just now. Even if you’ve got one leg hanging in the air, as long as you’re supported with your other limbs, you won’t fall.”

“Three points of support...” Mashiro chewed over what I’d just told her as she took hold of the tree. Before, she had no idea what to do with her weight, but now she was approaching the tree with new knowledge. She grunted. “Like this?”

“That’s it. Press your body closer to the tree now. Like you’re hugging it.”

“Clos...er!”

Mashiro looked like a trembling koala as she clung to the tree and slowly pulled her body up. The way she climbed was far from elegant. She looked clumsy. Pathetic. The fireworks seemed to sneer at her as they fired off mercilessly overhead—but maybe that was just me overthinking things.

Time seemed to warp then, and I had no idea how many minutes passed. This one event seemed so pointless, so fruitless in the grand scheme of human life.

Technically, it was trial and error, but that made it sound like it was something worth all this effort. There was nothing to be gained from this: it was pointless. But if this was what Mashiro needed to do to satisfy herself, then there had to be some merit in it. It would satisfy me too.

By going along with her fun, I was hoping she might forgive me a

little. For being a shallow piece of shit who put off my response to her wholehearted confession for so long.

That's it. Keep going, Mashiro.

"Just a...little more..."

Yeah. Just a little more. Just bring your body up a few more centimeters, stretch out your hand, and there's the branch you want.

"Eek!"

I gasped—but there was no need. Mashiro had lost her balance, but because she remembered the rule about having three points of support, she didn't fall.

"I can't... I can't lose...here!"

That's right. Don't lose.

"I need to be able to do this... I'm gonna..."

Go, Mashiro!

"I won't let Iroha-chan...win!"

Yeah! Don't let— Iroha?

Wait, what did you just say?

The bangs of the fireworks were nonstop, but even then—and despite that I was not the protagonist of a romantic comedy—I heard Mashiro's words loud and clear.

Let Iroha win? At what? In what way?

But I already knew the answer. The current context meant there was only one thing she could mean. Mashiro saw Iroha as a rival for my affections.

It made sense too. I mean, Iroha. She was annoying. Iroha was annoying, and that was cute. And when I say "cute," I mean I admire her charms as someone of the opposite sex. It was obvious to any third party observer that Iroha and I were aware of each other as members of opposing sexes. That was why Tsukinomori-san doubted our relationship, and why I tried to avoid being close to Iroha in public for a while.

I realized it now. Mashiro's behavior today was about more than just overcoming her weaknesses. It was about more than just being able to stand beside me. It was about standing beside *Iroha*, and competing as an equal for my affection. That was why Mashiro was trying to go beyond being just my friend's little sister.

Mashiro reached up to the colorful lights in the sky, her clothes and body a mess as she aimed even higher. She was like Icarus, flying with wax wings to capture the sun, but she too was punished for her greed, and ended up falling to the ground.

"Aaaaaaaaah!"

Except Mashiro's thick wax wings didn't burn up as quickly as Icarus's.

"I...made it!"

Mashiro reached the sun, grabbing it with her tiny hands. And the large fireworks of the night sky, there to celebrate her making it to the top and regaining what she left in the past...

...didn't go off.

The sky stayed dark, and everything around us stayed silent. There were no spectacular fireworks to bless this girl's perseverance.

"Ha ha! I did it! Did you see that, Aki?!"

"Yeah. I saw the whole thing."

Mashiro didn't seem to notice their absence, instead grinning at me behind a dirtied face like she didn't have a care in the world.

What happened to the girl who was freaking out over her makeup before?

That mean thought crossing my mind just went to show how I really was a piece of shit who could suck the fun out of us just being teenagers.

"You did good, Mashiro."

"Yeah, I worked hard. Harder than ever before in my life."

"That's gotta be an exaggeration."

"Don't underestimate how unfit I am! It's actually amazing that I managed to climb a huge tree."

"Is that really something you should be so proud of?"

"Maybe not." Mashiro shook her head before puffing out her chest. "But I never would have been *able* to be proud of it before."

"Yeah..."

Mashiro wasn't fit at all, and she used to *hate* it when someone pointed out and exposed her weaknesses like that. She lacked confidence. Mental fortitude. Both things that ran counter to her inflated sense of pride. She wanted to avoid it getting hurt, so she tucked it away in her shell to keep it safe. Without anything to chip away at it, that pride just kept growing and growing.

But now Mashiro was able to face her weaknesses head-on and overcome them. And that was why she was able to accept them now too.

"I don't get to see the fireworks, but I do get to sit next to you. That's all I need."

"M-Mashiro?"

She'd snuggled up to my arm. Her yukata was covered in dirt from the tree, and her skin was soaked with sweat. But there was nothing unpleasant about being close to her like this. Her softness and the mild scent of her sweat came together like a sweet poison that paralyzed my mind.

"I'm allowed this much as a reward, aren't I? I *am* your girlfriend after all."

"Well, yeah... If you want to make us look like a convincing

couple, I mean.”

“Right. I didn’t get to see the fireworks either. Only a really crappy game would make you go on a quest and not get rewarded for it.”

She was right. I knew this as a game developer myself.

But there is one small thing you’re wrong about, Mashiro.

“You’ll be able to see the fireworks.”

“What?”

“I put some insurance in place, just in case I didn’t make it in time. What kinda boyfriend would I be if I hadn’t prepared a reward for your hard work?”

“H-Hm. That’s what I like to hear. Did you buy some sparklers from one of the stalls or something?”

Even something simple became an awesome memory when it was shared between two people. You saw that idea all the time in stories. Its normalcy gave it a universal appeal, which made for a climatic romance scene. It would be a stylish climax for my story too, if my life were anything like a romantic comedy.

But my life was grounded in reality. And I wasn’t the protagonist of a romantic comedy, I was a real guy: Ooboshi Akiteru. I didn’t have the ability to recreate the sort of beautiful and cliché scene everyone loved to see. My only power was to do something ordinary; something anyone in my position could come up with.

“Watch carefully, Mashiro.”

“Huh?” Mashiro blinked in confusion as I pulled out my phone and pushed the call button.

“We’re ready. Please go ahead.”

That was the signal. While there weren’t any spectacular fireworks to celebrate a girl’s hard work...

...there *were* fireworks to celebrate *Mashiro’s* hard work.



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“Great job, Mashiro. You really are incredible.”

“Wh... Aki, what is this?”

“Like I said, this is my insurance. The biggest fireworks of all.”

“I-I can see that, it’s just... It doesn’t make any sense. How did you get them to set off fireworks?”

“Because I realized who the spy is. That’s how.”

“The spy? Dad’s spy?”

“Yeah. Your dad’s a lot of things, but he’s also a super talented CEO. He said he’d be keeping a close eye, which would mean making sure our fake relationship was going well and that I wasn’t hanging out with any other girls. And Honeyplace Works wouldn’t be where it is today if he wasn’t a man of his word.”

If he said he was going to be watching us, I didn’t doubt it was true. The question was where this spy of his was, and who would actually be observing our movements. The answer was simple.

“The men running the festival. The ones running the stalls and playing the music...and the ones setting off the fireworks. They were all spies.”

It was obvious if I calmly analyzed my memories. The musicians were playing an arrangement of the *Grand Fantasy 7 Remake*’s theme, a popular series by Honeyplace Works. They’d need permission to use the music of course, but that got me to thinking: what if this entire festival was supported by Honeyplace Works? The music alone wasn’t enough to convince me, but I had one more piece of evidence. It happened when Mashiro was scooping goldfish.

“That doesn’t make sense, Aki. Even a one percent SSR becomes a hundred percent chance if you never stop rolling till you get it.”

“I told you to stop using your literary prowess to come up with nonsense that sounds logical as long as you don’t think about it for more than one second!”

“Let go! I’m not giving up!”

“You’re really serious about this, huh? I guess this is how young girls born into rich families end up... Okay, I’m ready for ya, and I like your attitude. Here, take a new scoop!”

“Thank you, mister! See, Aki? This is where determination gets you!”

Why was it that the stallholder knew Mashiro was from a rich family? I’d only mentioned literary prowess. She hadn’t even debuted as a writer yet, she was a semiprofessional who’d gotten herself an editor. But when most people heard the word “author,” they probably had this image of somebody living comfortably off the mountains of royalties they were earning. It would have been more natural for the stallholder to assume all the money she was blowing through her royalty earnings, rather than spending a rich girl’s allowance.

But what if he already knew who Mashiro was?

Both my pieces of evidence were circumstantial at best. It wouldn't be enough to convict anybody in a court of law. But I didn't need concrete evidence, because it wasn't a bad thing if I was right.

Based on the timing of his visit, Tsukinomori-san probably knew we would pick this festival as our fake date venue when he came to talk to us; it was a huge event that marked the end of the summer vacation. I'd bet he told the men working the event to keep an eye on Mashiro and me, and that's why I phoned Tsukinomori-san before I rushed to where Mashiro was.

"You're using the men running this festival to keep an eye on us, right?"

"Excellente! You're a smart kid."

"I swear you think of the craziest things. You got an entire festival involved just to solve a personal matter?"

"It's no different from you getting your whole Alliance and my company involved for your own personal matters."

"Ouch..."

"It's not so bad to mix up public and private affairs, y'know. I don't know what things were like back when everyone was talking big about running their companies like military organizations, but we're moving into the age of individualism now—actually, we're skipping right past that and going back to an age of closed communities. Infrastructure organizations are whatever, but when you get to the creative industries, everything's a mess of public and private."

"Why does it sound like you're trying to scam me?"

"Whaaat? Can't hear you. Listen, when you're so popular with the ladies you might as well be the lead guy of a romantic comedy, you learn to filter out the stuff you don't wanna hear, see?"

"Aren't you always getting jealous about how popular other people are? Sounds like a double standard to me."

"I'm an adult! I can do what I want! I gave up my youth working to where I am now, so I'm allowed to dabble in that kinda thing."

"And now you're forcing me to go through that stuff under false pretenses. So, I'd like to call in a favor for figuring you out, if that's okay."

"Go on."

"Using a summer festival to take care of your own personal business is all kinds of ridiculous, which is why I feel I can ask this of you. Just one'll be enough. Could you hold back just one firework for me and my girlfriend?"

In the end, he set off way more than just the one firework.

There had to be a hundred of them bursting in the air. Flashes of

color, encroaching on the silent night. This was how many he'd held back for us.

"No one said you had to go this far, dude... He really is way too soft on his daughter."

I just wanted one (one-million-yen) firework. That was the maximum I'd calculated I could pay back using the Alliance's budget if there was a charge. But that damn Tsukinomori-san had upped the risk for the sake of his daughter. You know what they say though. High risk...

"Wow... They're so pretty..."

...high return.

I looked at Mashiro's face, lit up in the rain of colorful lights. Any stiffness had completely been melted away and replaced by utter joy, and I was glad now that my uncle had gone as far as he did. I wasn't about to get all soppy and say her smile was worth the price of a diamond or anything, but it was certainly worth the one million yen I could afford to pay from the budget.

I could remember that girl, holding her knees and curling up in the damp darkness at the bottom of the tree.

Now, her figure was glowing and illuminated by light.

I could see the change in her. Maybe it was only a single step forward. But it was there. Mashiro had changed.

"I'm sorry, Mashiro. I'm the shittiest boyfriend alive."

"What are you apologizing for? You put on this wonderful show, just for me."

"This is supposed to be super romantic, right? My head's supposed to be full of thoughts about you, my girlfriend, but...I'm thinking about the Alliance."

The first thing I thought of when I realized how much stronger Mashiro had gotten were the faces of my teammates. Ozu, who had gotten over his abysmal communication skills. Murasaki Shikibu-sensei, who had solved her disputes with her family and who'd stopped living by other people's rules. Me, who wanted to see myself in a more positive light and had learned that accepting some inefficiencies was part of that.

But there was one more person. Somebody who hadn't changed fundamentally like we had: Kohinata Iroha. My friend's little sister who had it in for me. If she could learn to be annoying to others too and show them all of her charms, then I was sure she would be able to live an easier life.

Yeah, I was a piece of shit. I knew Mashiro liked me, and it was just the two of us, but here I was busy thinking about how I could improve Iroha's life.

"You don't mean the Alliance. You mean Iroha-chan, don't you?"

I hesitated. “How much do you know?”

From the way she spoke, it sounded like she’d guessed Iroha’s secret—but Mashiro just shrugged off my question.

“Just so you don’t get any funny ideas, there’s nothing romantic between her and me. And I mean that.”

“What about feelings?”

“Absolutely none. I can say that with ninety-nine percent certainty.”

“Not a hundred?”

“I don’t understand myself enough to say for sure.”

“Because you’re a virgin. A teenage virgin.”

“Come on, now.”

She shouldn’t be saying words like that with a countenance as delicate as hers.

“Maybe this is the one aspect of life where I’m more mature than you.” Mashiro giggled before leaning against my shoulder and letting her head rest there. Her next words were quiet and sweet. “I don’t know what path you’re planning to take Iroha-chan down as her director, but I want to help you. As someone who knows more about what it means to be young than you do.”

“You wanna help?”

“Yeah. So tell me, Aki. What do you want to be to Iroha-chan? How do you want things to develop?”

“Is this some sort of strategy of yours?”

“Yeah. You know I’m stubborn. I want to use the time I have close to you as your girlfriend to share your burdens with you.”

Indecision, guilt, and mixed-up emotions. It should take a pretty mean person to take advantage of somebody’s weaknesses, but Mashiro was so forthright with her proposition that I couldn’t help but forgive her. So I told her.

Without revealing Iroha’s secret, I told Mashiro what I wanted to do with her. My desire to work as Kohinata Iroha’s director. I’d always wanted to share these feelings with more people. It was highly arrogant of me in the first place to dictate someone else’s relationships—almost self-righteous—but by getting approval from an outsider, at least I could get an objective opinion on the whole thing.

It was a little easier to share my plan with Mashiro too, since she wasn’t an Alliance member.

“That sounds like it’s fifty-fifty, Iroha-chan.”

Before I could think too hard about Mashiro’s murmur, I found my own words spilling out from deep inside me.

“I want Iroha to be able to tease other people in the same way she does to me. I want to find her a best friend. Someone she can have more fun with than me.”

Neither Mashiro nor I noticed the footsteps approaching the tree.
We didn't notice them falter and scatter off into the distance either.

Epilogue 1: Meeting with the CEO

“Bold move, rewarding your girlfriend’s efforts with a huge fireworks show.”

I could see them through the round lenses of my binoculars. Two fake lovers, sitting together in a tree and watching the last of the fireworks. It reminded me of my own lost youth, and those memories seemed to seethe like a dark mass in the pit of my stomach.

What made it worse was that he was my nephew, and she was my beloved daughter.

Now that the fireworks show had ended, swarms of people were making their way home around me. I stayed right where I was on that bench, crunching the fried octopus in my mouth and taking out all my anger on it.

“You look happy.”

An amused voice came from above me, and I looked up to see a woman standing by the bench. While beautiful, she was not my lover. Nobody would protest if I proclaimed her to be a human manifestation of the goddess Aphrodite. Her golden hair was neatly tied up, glossy like a thoroughbred’s, and hanging down in a soft braid over her motherly chest.

Her outfit looked simple, but anyone with any class would know it was high-end. That and her perfectly straight posture made her look like she belonged on the American president’s arm.

This was Amachi Otoha. Or, to use her nonprofessional name, Kohinata Otoha. One name she used for her position of CEO, and the other she used as the mother of Kohinata Iroha-kun, a possible rival love interest for my nephew. I’d been keeping an eye on that girl for the past few days.

Honeyplace Works wasn’t the only sponsor of this festival. Her company, Tenchido, was on the list too. We’d both been given special complimentary tickets for the fireworks show, so we’d been hanging out together and talking about our daughters and my nephew.

“Happy? Me? I’m getting cucked by my own nephew!”

“We’ve known each other for so long that I’m going to say this very nicely: using that term for your own daughter is egregiously creepy.”

“I’d have thought the president of Tenchido would be a little more thoughtful, or at least be good at understanding the hearts of others.”

"Really? I don't think you'll find many women as sentimental as me."

"I know. Still holding a grudge, aren't you?"

"Yes. Enough to keep my children far away, at least." She wore the smile of a saint, but the venom in her voice was enough to have even me breaking out into a cold sweat.

I knew what had led to that persistent darkness inside her, so I could sympathize. At the same time, and as a parent myself, I couldn't help feeling sorry for her children.

"You shouldn't let your own values tie up your children, don'tcha think? They have a word for that nowadays: helicopter parenting. You heard that one?"

"Boom!"

"Boom?"

I didn't know what she was doing, but I'd appreciate it if she didn't point her finger at me like a gun. This was the president of Tenchido! If she wanted me dead, she just might be able to do it.

"You have no right to call me a helicopter parent. Put your hand to your heart and do some thinking."

"What? My heart's got nothing but love for Mashiro in it!"

"*That's* what I'm talking about. You're sticking your nose into her love life, telling her what she can and can't do. If *I'm* a helicopter parent, then I think you definitely qualify as one too."

I grunted. "Y-You might have a point—e-except! I do everything out of love! That's the difference!"

"I love Ozuma and Iroha a great deal too! You want to restrict your daughter's love life. I'm more concerned about entertainment. That's the only difference between us, but our love is the same."

I could only grumble in the face of her personal brand of weaselly logic. I didn't know if she did it on purpose or not, but she tended to shift the flow of conversation so that she had the upper hand. It was like she weaved her way through the gaps in your emotions, and if you held differing views at the start of the discussion, she'd gradually twist your thoughts until you ended up agreeing with her. She was like a hero leading the masses to accept her new definition of justice, but also like a dictator deceiving people so she could leave her huge claw marks on the world when it was all over. A sorcerer of conversation, something that was rare among management staff like us.

I'm saying all of this while grounded in reality. There was no fantasy element to anything she did. Amachi Otoha-san was a real-life user of brainwashing magic.

"I wouldn't have turned things back on you if you hadn't gotten so ahead of yourself in trying to lecture me." She laughed.

“I know, you win. I don’t have the balls to make an enemy out of you. Anyway, what were we talking about?”

“About how happy you looked.”

“Oh, right. So why do you think I’m happy then?”

“The truth is, you want Ooboshi-kun and Mashiro-chan to get involved with each other. I know that much.”

“Don’t tell me what I’m thinking, please—especially when it’s not true.”

“I don’t think you can tell me for certain that it’s ‘not true.’”

Amachi-san narrowed her eyes at me suggestively, then she took the binoculars from my grasp and looked through them herself. Her cheeks pinkened slightly as she gazed at the fake couple in the tree. “They’re a good match, don’t you think? Innocent. I don’t think anything *you’re* worried about would even happen before they’re married.”

“You sure know how to hit ‘em where it hurts. People ever tell you you’re kind of an ass?”

“Yes, I get those kinds of compliments all the time.”

Clearly Amachi-san took “positive thinking” to terrifying new levels.

“Anyway, I get it. Mashiro’ll go off and get married one day. At the very least, I want her to find a man who can make her smile like he does.”

By that, I meant a guy who was willing to hijack a fireworks display just to make one girl smile. He’d gifted those fireworks to Mashiro despite the risk and the craziness of the whole idea—an idea he’d come up with impressively quickly. His abundant manliness impressed me, and that was despite my general dislike for teenagers. It made me think that I wouldn’t mind leaving Mashiro to him.

“I don’t like what you’re up to, though. You’re pretending this is all for my benefit, but it’s just as convenient for you too, isn’t it?”

“Ooboshi-kun is a pleasant young man. He seems to get along with Ozuma, and he would be a perfect husband for Iroha,” Amachi-san paused, “if not for one fatal flaw.”

“His leadership of the 05th Floor Alliance.”

“Correct. Although it would be fine if he was like me and saw his creators as tools of his trade rather than anything else.”

“But he’s not like you.”

Akiteru-kun had said as much himself when the three of us had hotpot together.

“I love everyone in the 05th Floor Alliance. I love the product they’ve worked so hard on from the bottom of my heart. I don’t just want it to sell; I want it to be a good product. If I was in it for the money, I’d go into law or medicine or something.”

Akiteru-kun was still young and inexperienced, but he was already able to see things from both a business and his creators' points of view. The rarity of such a skill meant it piqued my curiosity hugely, but Amachi-kun seemed to think differently.

"I'm just worried he'll tempt my Iroha into consuming entertainment."

"That's why you don't want them dating, eh? What about Ozuma-kun, though? You said they were friends. Is that all right with you?"

"Oh, I think that much is fine. Ozuma isn't influenced by anything."

"I see. I think."

What an odd thing to say. Amachi-san continued before I could ask any questions.

"It does seem that Ooboshi-kun's already had quite the influence on Iroha. *That's* something I've been fretting over."

"They really are that close, then?"

"It seems they fall short of being a couple, at least."

"Hmm..."

According to my background checks, they had been witnessed flirting with each other. When I analyzed the details, though, it sounded more like Iroha-kun would go on the offensive while Akiteru-kun would respond with bluntness to fend her advances off. While there was another female in his life, I could see that he was trying to respect the contract we had.

"I don't get to spend much time at home, so I haven't been able to observe them that closely. But after today, I'm sure of it: Iroha's fallen in love with Ooboshi-kun."

"So now you're cheering Mashiro on so that she can get between them, is that it? You have some nerve, using my daughter like that! Even someone as chill as me's gonna throw a tantrum at that!"

"Oh? Do I take that to mean Mr. Honeyplace Works would like to pick a fight with Tenchido?"

"I sure would! Let's see which sells better: our *Grand Fantasy 7 Remake*, or your *Marine Crossing: New Coastlines*!" I guffawed.

"I do wonder how much it cost you to get out a game of that quality. We pride ourselves on quality too, of course, but we also like to keep our development efficient. It would be more interesting to see which of us makes more of a profit. Tee hee! Tee hee hee!"

"Ha ha ha! Ha ha ha ha!"

"Tee hee! Hee hee!"

We shared a harmonious chuckle. It was a gentle gesture; amiable, if you will. But between rivals. Not friends.

"Anyway, I've decided to stop sticking my nose into their romance now. The manliness he's put on show tonight means I can't stop

Mashiro falling in love with him, and he's earned the right to steal her away from me. Still, if he chooses Iroha-kun instead in the end, that's up to him."

"How noble of you. There's nothing stopping you from being a bit more proactive about things."

"Kids aren't simple enough that us adults can dictate their paths like that. I know that much."

"Oh? If you say so. But I'll be doing my own thing, whether you're willing to give me a hand or not." The emotion faded from Amachi-san's face as suddenly as a candle going out, and all the antagonism I'd felt from her went with it. "So what you're saying is that Ooboshi-kun's done a good job at being a teenager, so now you won't rescind your offer for the Alliance to join Honeyplace Works?"

"As long as he sticks with Mashiro. I don't want him to spend his school days *too* freely."

"Is that right?"

"I need him to protect Mashiro at school. Even if they start getting serious about each other, as long as he remains her knight, and doesn't leave her alone for some other girl... That's when we'd be having problems."

"Tee hee. Sounds like we'll both be sprouting rotors at this rate."

"We're not the same. I've got a deal with that kid."

This was about more than my self-interest. Akiteru-kun was the one who got ballsy and asked me to hire his team in the first place, and Amachi-san needed to remember that.

"And, y'know, I've got an important reason for not wanting him to date other girls."

"Oho? It does spark my curiosity when you drop heavy hints like that." Amachi-san's eyes gleamed with interest as she inclined her head at me.

I twiddled my stylish mustache and narrowed my eyes as I stared off far into the distance. "It makes me mad to think my nephew might be popular with girls."

When it came to that, at least, my hands were tied...

Epilogue 2: The Fireworks of Tumultuous Love

“I want Iroha to be able to tease other people in the same way she does me. I want to find her a best friend. Someone she can have more fun with than me.”

I noticed my stealthy steps faltering the moment I heard it. I stepped on the grass wrong and it made a rustling noise.

D-Did they hear me?

Worried, I glanced up the giant tree to check, but Senpai and Mashiro-senpai were sitting close together just like before. There was a painful stab in my chest.

I swear it was a coincidence that I found them. When the fireworks went up, I was having a riot with the girls in my class, and we were taking pictures on our phones and stuff. That was when a LIME message came through. A LIME message from mom.

Apparently, she had a ticket to see the fireworks because of some connection to a company sponsoring the show. She said she wanted to meet up when she was here, and I asked her if we could do it later because I was with my friends, but she insisted. So I ended up going to where she wanted to meet: the area behind the shrine.

That was when I saw them. I saw Mashiro-senpai, desperately trying to climb that tree. I saw Senpai giving her a huge private fireworks show like he'd arranged it in advance. I saw them cuddled together.

Okay, so they were on a fake date, and of course they had to make a show of being all intimate and stuff. Rationally, I knew that. When I was walking around with the girls in my class, the image of Senpai and Mashiro-senpai kept coming into my head, and I had to remind myself every time that it was all for the Alliance. Nothing more and nothing less.

But that didn't work when they were there right in front of me.

Seeing Mashiro-senpai try so hard to show Senpai how far she'd come warmed my heart, and it was cute. I knew she was my rival, but I still found myself holding my breath and cheering her on. It was kinda unfair how I literally couldn't bring myself to hate her for it.

And Senpai's expression as he watched her was so incredibly gentle. It was like watching the prince and princess in a fairytale. Seeing that was enough to make my heart sink, but what really got me

was what Senpai said about me.

“He wants to find me someone I’ll have more fun with than when I’m with him?”

What was that supposed to mean? Did that mean he hated it when I teased him and got into his space? And now he wanted to force someone else to take his place?

No, that was dumb. That wasn’t how Senpai’s brain worked. I was sure that he just meant he was worried about my relationships at school, that’s all.

But even if I was right about that part, it definitely sounded like he wanted to spend less time with me, no matter how you sliced it.

That was the thought that made me run. I turned my back on them and raced away through the grounds. I passed Tomosaka-san and the girls I came here with, but I didn’t even stop when they called me. I didn’t care about meeting up with mom anymore either.

I didn’t know what to do. Nothing was making sense. Running like this was gonna make people worry about me, ask unwanted questions, and think something was up. I could fix it if I just started acting again, calmed myself down, and smoothed things over.

But I couldn’t. Something gross was running wild in my heart and messing up my whole sense of reason.

I didn’t want to let Senpai go.

I didn’t want to get close to him.

I didn’t want him to keep his distance from me.

Selfish emotions were going up inside me like fireworks, while others came in to contradict them, crackling like sparklers...before everything started exploding, one after the other.

I hated it. I hated it all. Most of all, I hated how selfish I was.

I knew Mashiro-senpai had feelings for Senpai, but I’d relied on him always putting the Alliance first. That was why I felt safe letting everything go on as it always had. I was able to live my blissful fantasy of being in love with Senpai while holding on to my friendship with Mashiro-senpai.

But that could only work if our relationships kept a fixed balance—if neither of us actually got romantically involved with him. If we each had the same level of contact with him.

Mashiro-senpai was in his class, so she had the advantage at school, but when it was time to go home, I could come and go into his apartment as I pleased. That was what kept our relationships with him balanced so far. But if she got closer to him and I got further away...

“I couldn’t take it,” I whimpered.

I didn’t want to be alone right now, but I didn’t really have anyone I could depend on at a time like this.

My legs ended up carrying me to what was practically my third

home.

Otoi.

There was that nameplate on the wooden gates leading up to the traditional house. I saw that nameplate about as often as I saw my parents. Otoi-san was like a sister to me. She and Senpai had helped me out during middle school. I staggered up to the gate and peered through. Otoi-san was chilling on the porch with tea and snacks. She must have been watching the fireworks.

“Oh, Kohinata,” she said, noticing me. “‘Sup?”

Hearing her voice and seeing her raise a lazy hand in my direction snapped something inside me.

“Otoi-san!” I threw myself into her chest. I couldn’t let her see my face and the stupid pathetic expression on it. “Help me, Otoi-san...”

“Somethin’ happen?” There was a small hint of confusion in her tone, but she patted my head gently.

It was like I was enveloped in her warmth. My outer shell fell limp, letting out all the raging emotions within me at once.

“I don’t know what to do! I love it all too much!”

This was divine punishment. Punishment for not being honest with Senpai about my feelings. The gods favored those who were honest. It was because Mashiro-senpai was honest, confessed to him, and faced everything head on that she stole away that place by his side.

“I love being with Senpai! I love the time I spend with him! But I love everyone in the Alliance too! I love Mashiro-senpai, and I love working on *Koyagi* with you, Senpai, and everyone else so much, and...and I just want everything to stay exactly how it is!”

But I needed to choose. Either I went up against Mashiro-senpai and confessed to Senpai, or I locked away my feelings so that I could keep on being her friend. Should I set off those fireworks? Or should I leave them?

“What do I do, Otoi-san?”

I’d held everything in up till now.

I pretended that I didn’t care about acting, because I didn’t want to hurt mom. I pretended I wasn’t interested in Senpai romantically, because I didn’t want to hurt Mashiro-senpai.

But I was contradicting what Senpai told me. He taught me that happiness is being true to the things you love. But what if my happiness couldn’t exist alongside the happiness of others?

It felt like my body was being torn apart from both sides by that powerful contradiction, that question without an answer. Trying to solve that mess all by myself made me feel like I would break.

That was why I’d spilled everything to Otoi-san. Nonjudgmental, sisterly Otoi-san.

“How do I be true to myself without hurting anyone?”



Afterword

Hello, readers! Author mikawaghost here. Volume five featured a lot of stormy romance, with not only the usual sweet stuff, but a little angst in there as well. What did you think?

I'm sure many of you are wondering how things are going to turn out, so I hope you'll look forward to volume six and take a look at the preview for now, because I'm not covering that in this afterword. Instead, I'm going to do my usual thing of sharing a hilarious story with you.

This one's all about the terrifying phenomenon that is doxxing.

The fake romance, the Phantom Voice Troop, Makigai Namako. There are many people in ImoUza who are hiding their identities, resulting in dumb situations and frustrating misunderstandings. Just like them, I work under a pen name. Mikawaghost isn't my real name, and I live my day to day life hiding who I really am.

I was at my favorite seitaï massage place when they asked me about my job. So I answered, without giving away my pen name:

"Oh, my job? Yeah, I'm a writer. You know."

I just brushed it off. But then recently, my massage doctor said this:

"You write books under the name mikawaghost, don't you?"

I. Was. Stunned.

How did she know? Was she some crazed yandere stalker? Or had my personal details been uploaded onto the dark web? I bet you guys are thinking all sorts of things, but you're probably wrong.

The real perpetrator behind this doxxing was the recent you-know-what that's been teaching all of us the art of self-discipline and having fun at home. F*ck you, C*rona!

Because it's hard to social distance when you're massaging someone, the store had voluntarily closed its doors for a while. The doctor kindly said she'd come to give me a personal service if my body started acting up, so we exchanged phone numbers. (I haven't needed to call her yet, though.)

That was when a tragedy occurred. A certain famous messaging app and its accursed function of suggesting people in your phone contacts to add as friends, offered "mikawaghost" to her as a suggestion. Isn't that the most terrifying thing you've ever heard? Or maybe I was just too careless. Ugh...

Anyway, now you know how easy it is to dox yourself by accident. *ImoUza* and all the story's secrets, hidden and exposed, are going to get more and more exciting! The limited edition of volume six will come with a special pamphlet and a third drama CD! Things are going swimmingly for this series, and I hope you'll stay along for the ride!

That's all from me,
mikawaghost

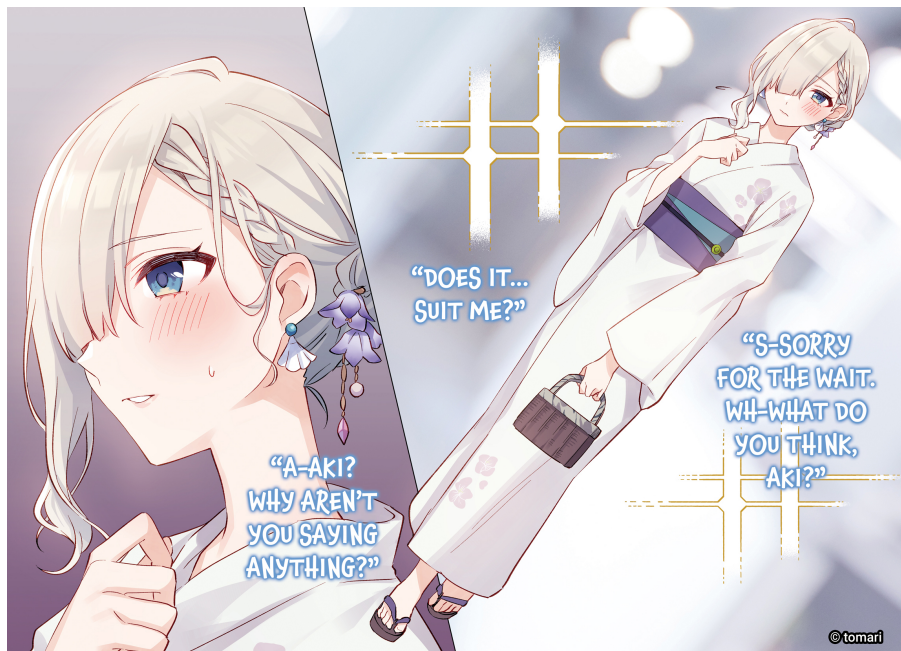
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My Friend's
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Has It **IN** for Me!

vol. **5**



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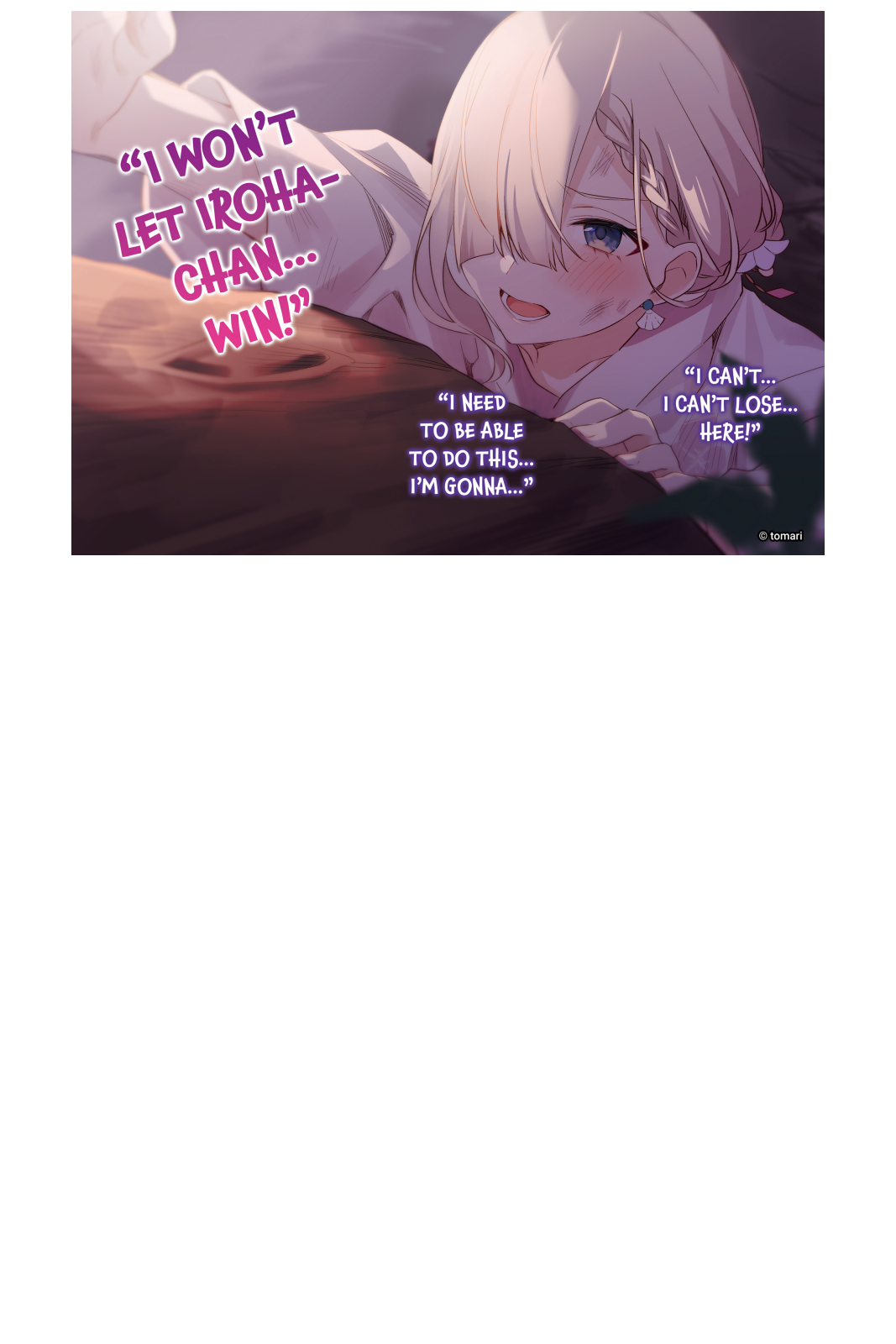


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WH-WHAT DO
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**"I WON'T
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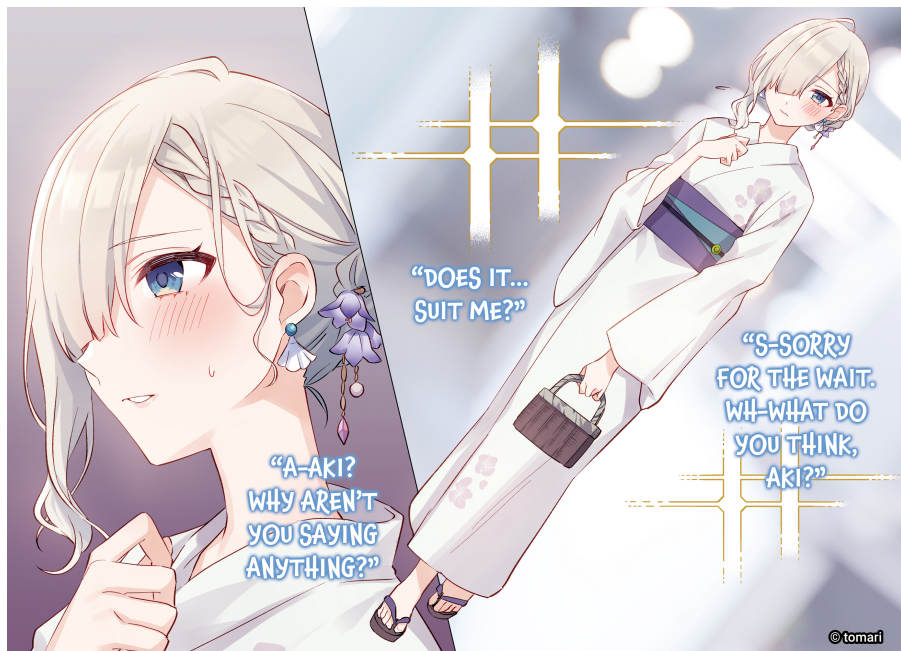
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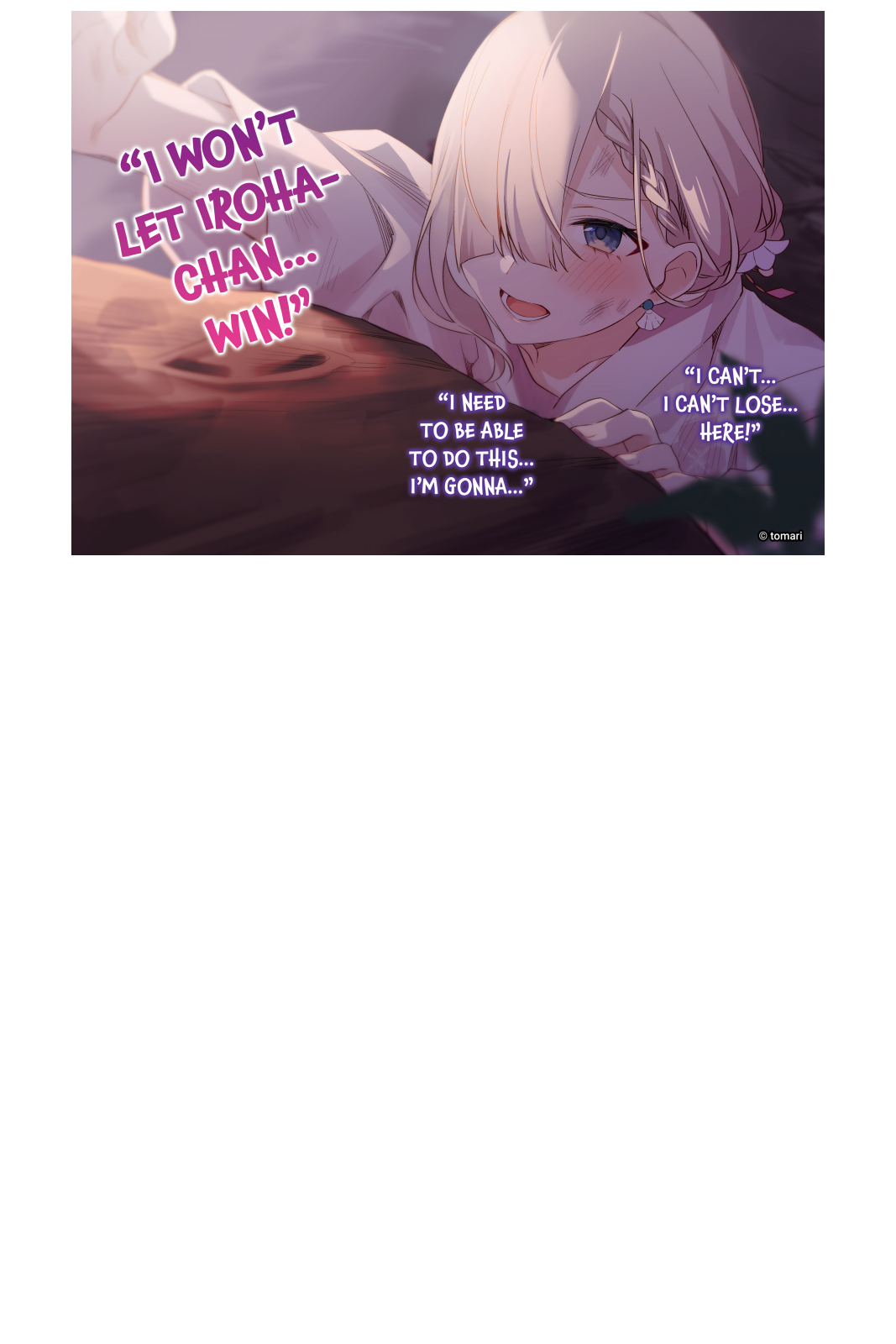


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by mikawaghost

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